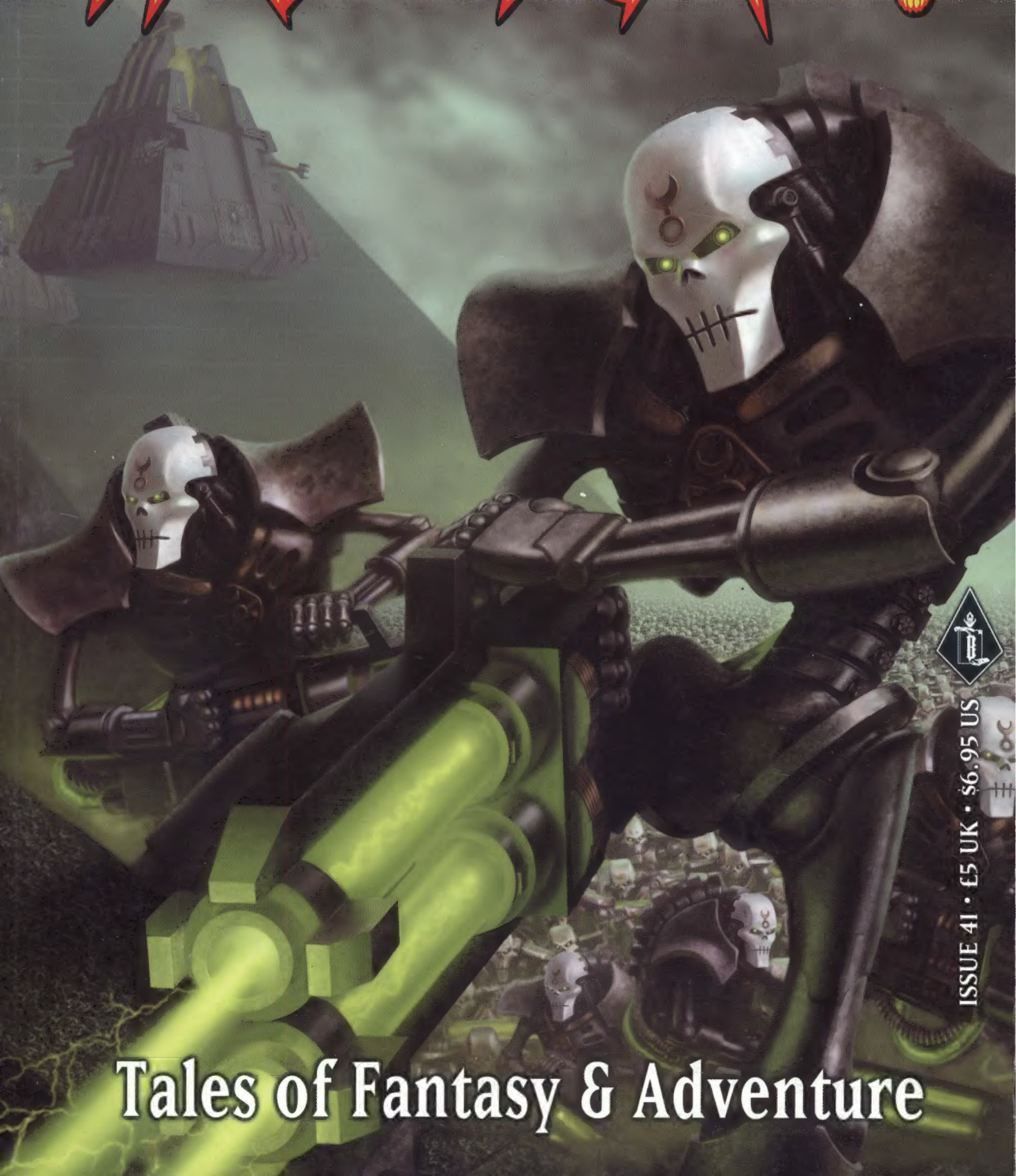


# INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

# INFERNO!

**H**AS ANYBODY seen the Eric Stoltz movie *Killing Zoe*? It's not bad as far as heist-gone-wrong movies go but there's one particular bit that really sticks out in my mind. Stoltz's character, Zed, has just flown into Paris from the USA to help out on a bank job and he's taken to a house to meet up with the rest of the gang. As he's being shown in, he steps over a cat lying on the floor. Asking if the cat's dead, the Frenchman he's with replies that he doesn't know and that the cat has been like that for days. Stoltz's character then kicks the cat – which doesn't move – and declares that it must be dead.

Now, I'm sure that this is some kind of symbolism put into the movie by either the script writer or director but I just didn't get it (answers on a postcard please). Maybe it's got something to do with French movies because the whole thing with the cow wandering around in the slums of Paris completely passed me by in *La Haine* as well.

Basically, all this did was make me go 'huh?' and break my suspension of disbelief. Not that a dead cat lying on the floor of a Paris apartment is so highly unbelievable that I had a hard time reconciling it, but rather that it felt so out of place at that point, considering what had happened previously

in the movie, that I couldn't understand why it was in the movie at all. In my opinion, all it served to do was add dead weight to the plot of the movie.

Which brings me to the point of this editorial.

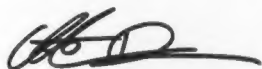
**S**EVERAL MONTHS ago, the Black Library editorial staff were whisked away to an exotic location (the Games Workshop boardroom, to be precise) for an entire afternoon of discussing what makes a good story. Now some of you might think that this was a bit of an impossible task; after all, what floats one person's boat might be like an iceberg in the path of the *Titanic* to another but, in terms of deciding what elements are common to all good stories, the afternoon was a huge success.

One of the points that I was keen to make was about leanness of plot. The example I used in the meeting was a fantastic short story called *White Noise* by the author Garry Kilworth, which is essentially a tale of two radio engineers who visit a listening post on the banks of the Dead Sea to carry out routine maintenance. When they get there they discover that speakers have been plugged into the post's console and faint sounds are emanating from it. What they later discover, however, is

that the noise is actually the sounds of battle from when Moses led his people out of Egypt. This then poses them with a dilemma: should they destroy the post before they potentially hear, or not hear, the voice of God?

Every plot point in the story marries up with the others. Early on in the story it's established that one of the characters has become an atheist because his wife died in a terrorist attack and the other is almost certainly Catholic because of his Italian upbringing, both pieces of characterisation essential for setting up the dilemma they both face at the end and ultimately, the decision one of them takes. The location of the story serves multiple purposes; it has to take place close to the Dead Sea for the sound of Moses passing through the parted waves to be retained in cold currents and also gives credence to the character's wife dying in a terrorist attack. Just like all good fiction, and certainly all good Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 fiction, the plot carries no dead weight.

And certainly no dead cats.



Christian Dunn  
Editor

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### Write to us

Inferno! • The Black Library • Games Workshop Ltd • Willow Road • Lenton • Nottingham NG7 2WS • UK

### Email us

[publishing@games-workshop.co.uk](mailto:publishing@games-workshop.co.uk)

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Christian Dunn

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Matt Ralphs

### PRODUCTION

Dan Drane

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Robert Earl

David Griffiths

Darius Hinks

Ralph Horsley

Sandy Mitchell

Richard Williams

### ARTISTS

Jim Brady

Tom Carney

Ralph Horsley

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# ECHOES OF THE TOMB

A CIAPHAS CAIN STORY

BY SANDY MITCHELL



**I**F THERE'S ONE basic principle I've learned in over a century of rattling around the galaxy fighting the Emperor's enemies (whenever I couldn't avoid it), it's 'leave well alone'. Three simple words which have stood me in good stead over the years; judiciously applied they've made my commissarial duties a great deal easier than they might have been. Unfortunately it's a phrase the Adeptus Mechanicus seems incapable of grasping, a failing which almost cost me my life.

I suppose I'd better explain. By the end of 928 my undeserved reputation for heroism had grown to such a ridiculous level that I'd finally attracted the attention of the upper echelons of the commissariat, who had decided that a man of my obvious talents was wasted in the posting to an obscure artillery unit I had so carefully arranged for myself in the hope of being able to sit out my lifetime of service to the Emperor a long way away from any actual fighting. As it turned out, by sheer bad luck I'd managed to put myself in harm's way an inordinate number of times, emerging on every occasion trailing clouds of undeserved glory, so that to the sector at large I seemed to be the very epitome of the swashbuckling hero that commissars are generally considered not to be. (Most regiments regard us as something akin to the engineseers in the transport pool; sometimes necessary, occasionally useful, generally best avoided.)

Accordingly I found myself transferred to a desk job at brigade headquarters, which at first seemed like a gift from the Emperor himself. I had a nice comfortable office, with an anteroom in which Jurgen, my aide, was able to lurk, deterring all but the most determined of visitors with his single-minded devotion to following orders as literally as possible and his paint-blistering body odour. For a while it seemed that my days of fleeing in terror from genestealers, chaos cultists, and blood-maddened orks were over. But of course it was all too good to be true. The staff officers were delighted to discover that they had a bona fide hero among them (at least, so they believed), which

meant every time they needed an independent commissar to accompany some particularly dangerous or foolhardy mission, they sent for me.

Thanks to my finely-honed instinct for self-preservation I managed to make it back every time, though this which only encouraged them to think I was the greatest thing since Macharius, and just the man to send out on an even more dangerous assignment just as soon as they could think of something sufficiently lethal.

Enough was enough, I decided, and hearing that someone was needed to liaise with an Astartes company which was campaigning alongside the Guard in a routine action to clear some heretics off an agriworld on the spinward fringes of our sector decided to volunteer for the job. After my last little jaunt, rescuing some hostages from an eldar pirate base, I thought a bit of quiet diplomacy would be just the change of pace I needed.

'You don't think you'll find this sort of thing a little... tame?' General Lokris, a genial old buffer I'd probably quite like if he didn't keep trying to get me killed, asked, raising a shaggy white eyebrow in my direction. We were dining together in his private chambers, the skill of his chef more than making up for the tedium of his company, and I had a shrewd suspicion that this demonstration of his regard was intended to sway me into changing my mind. I took another mouthful of the salma, which was poached to perfection, to give myself time to formulate an acceptable answer.

'Well it's got to be more interesting than shuffling datafiles,' I said, smiling ruefully. That fitted his mental image of Cain the Man of Action quite nicely, and he nodded sympathetically. 'Besides,' I went on, seeing no harm in laying it on with a trowel, 'how often am I going to get the chance to go into battle alongside the Astartes?' Never, if I had anything to do with it, but Lokris didn't need to know that. He nodded eagerly at the prospect, quite enthused on my behalf, and took an extravagant pull at his wineglass to restore his composure.

'Quite right, my boy. What an experience that would be.' He sipped at his drink again, growing quietly contemplative. 'By the Emperor, if I were a hundred years younger I'd volunteer myself.'

'It's not as though there's anything urgent I need to do here,' I went on. 'Jorgen can take care of the routine stuff while I'm gone.' I would have preferred to take him with me, of course, but I was uncomfortably aware of the impression he was bound to make on the genetically-enhanced supermen of the Astartes, and had no wish to undermine my credibility before the assignment had even begun. Besides, while he was here he could watch my back, making sure I wasn't earmarked for any more suicide missions. I knew something was in the wind, which was why I'd seized on this diplomatic assignment so eagerly. For once, whatever Lokris and his cronies were planning they could leave me out of it.

'You should reach the Viridian system in about a month,' the general said. 'I don't suppose the heretics will be able to hold out for much longer than that, but even if they do you ought to be back here by around two hundred next year at the latest.'

'Emperor willing,' I said, making a mental note to spin the assignment out for longer than that if I could. He might not have a specific reason for wanting me back by then, but you never know.



**M**Y FIRST surprise was the transport ship I'd been assigned to. Instead of a troopship or a supply vessel, both of which I was intimately acquainted with after all my years of shuffling from one warzone to the next, I found my shuttle docking at a light freighter bearing the unmistakable sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus. They seemed to be expecting me. There was an honour guard of their augmetically enhanced troopers lining the walls of the hanger bay, and a tech-priest with a wide smile and a couple of mechadendrites waving lazily over his

shoulders was waiting at the bottom of the shuttle's exit ramp. He stuck out a hand for me to shake as I descended, and on taking it I was surprised to find it was still unaugmented flesh.

'Commissar Cain,' he said. 'Welcome aboard. I'm Magos Killian, leader of the expedition, and this really is a tremendous honour. We've heard all about you, of course, and I must say we're thrilled to have you travelling with us.'

'Expedition?' I said, trying to ignore the sudden lurching sensation in the pit of my stomach. 'I was under the impression I've been assigned to liaise between the guard units and the Reclaimers task force in the Viridia system.'

'Didn't they tell you?' Confusion, exasperation and amusement chased themselves across Killian's face. 'Well, that's the munitorium for you, I suppose. We're making a rendezvous with a Reclaimers battle barge in the Interitus system, so some clerical drone obviously thought it would save you a bit of time to hitch a lift with us and transfer across when we meet them.' He fished a data-slate from some recess of his immaculate white robes, and fiddled with it for a moment. 'The next scheduled departure for Viridia is in another three weeks. Allowing for the wait before the barge arrives in orbit around Interitus Prime, you should be there about...' he consulted the slate again, making a couple of quick calculations as he did so, 'about thirty-six hours ahead of them. If the warp currents are favourable, of course.'

'Of course,' I said. I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or angry. On the one hand I'd be spending an extra three weeks on a roundabout voyage to Emperor-knew-where, but on the other that was three weeks I wouldn't have to worry about Lokris and his friends trying to find some new and inventive way of getting me killed. On balance that was an acceptable trade-off, I felt. I smiled, and nodded with every appearance of polite interest I could summon up. 'I'm looking forward to hearing all about this expedition of yours.'

A servitor scuttled past me and up the ramp of the shuttle to retrieve my kitbag, which from habit I'd left lying where it was

on the subconscious assumption that Jurgen would deal with it. Killian nodded with every indication of eagerness as we strolled past the line of tech-guards, every one of them immaculate, hellguns at the port. They looked formidable enough on parade, I found myself thinking, but I was by no means sure their fighting prowess would be a match for real guardsmen.

As it turned out I was to see for myself how effective they were before very long, and if I'd realised that at the time, and against how terrible a foe, I would certainly have thanked the tech-priest politely for his offer and bolted for the shuttle without a second thought. But of course I didn't, so I simply strolled along beside him, blithely unaware that we were all on a voyage to perdition.



**D**ESPITE MY forebodings the trip itself turned out to be remarkably pleasant. In striking contrast to the basic conditions aboard the troopships I was used to, the *Omnissiah's Blessing* felt more like a luxury liner. I had a well-appointed stateroom assigned to me, with a couple of hovering cyber-skulls humming quietly in the corner with nothing better to do than scoot off to find anything I required, and the cuisine was first rate. A real surprise this, as in my experience tech-priests tend not to worry about that sort of thing, looking on the necessity of taking in regular nourishment as a distasteful reminder of their fleshly origins or some such nonsense. I'd been steeling myself to face a plateful of soylens viridiens or something equally unappetising the first time I wandered down to the mess hall, only to find a pleasantly appointed dining room which wouldn't have looked out of place in a smart hotel, and was immediately assailed by the mouth-watering odour of sauteed grox.

I was still enjoying my first meal aboard when Killian ambled over, a plate of grox and fresh vegetables in one hand, a large bowl of ackenberry sorbet in the other, and a steaming mug of recaf waving

precariously from a mechadendrite. I gestured for him to join me, and after a few preliminary pleasantries he began to chat about their voyage.

'No reason you shouldn't at least know where we're going,' he said cheerfully, the unoccupied mechadendrite diving into the recesses of his robe for the dataslate. He placed it on the table and continued to manipulate the controls with the mechanical limb, while his real ones plied knife and fork with evident enthusiasm. A star chart appeared, the Viridian system just at the fringes of the display, and a small, sullen stellar revenant centred in the screen.

'Looks inviting,' I said, with heavy irony. To my surprise Killian chuckled.

'Does rather, doesn't it?' he said, zooming the display so that the target system filled the screen. A handful of dark and airless worlds orbited the decaying star, seared to cinders when it went nova millions of years before, taking whatever life had existed there into oblivion before sinking back into the sullen, cooling ember about which the few surviving rocks still drifted.

'This is the Interitus system,' he said. 'Well named, I'm sure you'll agree.' I nodded.

'I can't for the life of me see what you'd want there,' I admitted. 'Let alone why an Astartes chapter would divert a battle barge from a warzone to meet you.'

Killian positively beamed, and pointed to the largest chunk of rock in the system.

'This is Interitus Prime. The whole system was surveyed by explorators back in the twenty-eighth millennium. In the most cursory fashion I may add, if the surviving records are anything to go by.'

'Your records go back that far?' I couldn't keep an edge of incredulity from my voice. That was the all but unimaginable golden age when the Emperor still walked among men and the Imperium was young and vigorous, its domination of the galaxy uncontested, instead of being riven by heresy and threatened on all sides by malevolent powers. Killian nodded.

'Only in the most fragmentary form, of course. But there are still tantalising hints for those prepared to meditate for long



enough upon them, and put their trust in the benevolence of the Ommissiah.'

'And you think there's something there worth going after,' I said. There wasn't much which would drag a ship full of cogboys halfway across the sector, and it wasn't hard to guess which item on that very short list was the attraction here. 'Some significant stash of archeotech perhaps?'

'Perhaps,' Killian nodded, evidently pleased at my perspicacity. 'We won't know for sure until we get there, will we?'

'I suppose not,' I conceded, turning my attention to the desserts.



**T**HE REST OF the voyage passed pleasantly enough, although apart from Killian I had little to do with the tech-priests on board. For company I gravitated naturally to the tech-guards, with whom I had a little more in common, finding that despite their augmetic enhancements and a devotion to the cult of the machine which I found a trifle disconcerting (I've little enough patience with Emperor-botherers at the best of times, let alone ones who seem to think he runs on clockwork), they were as disciplined and professional in their way as any of the warriors I'd served with. Moreover they'd heard of me, and believed every word of my reputation. Their only drawback from my point of view was that they didn't seem to have any currency, being some sort of vassals of the adeptus, so there wasn't much point in getting my tarot deck out. Their commanding officer, a Lieutenant Tarkus, was a keen regicide player however, and a hard opponent to beat, so I was able to keep my brain ticking over while the ship scuttled nervously through the warp towards whatever might be lurking at our destination.

It was Tarkus who finally put my mind at rest about the battle barge; it seemed that, despite my obvious concerns, its formidable firepower wasn't to be deployed in our defence.

'Ommissiah no!' he said, casually dispatching one of my lancers with a sudden flanking movement I should have seen coming. 'It's on its way to clean out the rebel base on Viridia Secundus.' I nodded gravely, pretending I'd read the briefing slate about the tactical situation in the Viridia system. It seemed the heretics had taken control of more than just the main world, then. 'They're only hooking up with us long enough to transfer a squad of Space Marines over. And to pick you up, of course.'

Well that was something, although a potential threat potent enough to require an Astartes squad to contain wasn't to be taken all that lightly. I consoled myself with the reflection that it wasn't my problem anyway, I'd be safe aboard one of the most powerful vessels in space and a long way away from Interitus Prime before anyone started to meddle with whatever chunk of archeotech the cogboys were after. I nodded judiciously, playing for time, and made a feint with a trooper hoping to draw his ecclesiarch out of position.

'I'm sure you'll feel safer having them around,' I said blandly. 'Can't be too careful, after all.' As I'd hoped, the half of his face which wasn't made of metal coloured visibly as he considered the implied slur on his command, and he moved a little too hastily, creating an opening I should be able to exploit a couple of moves further on in the game.

'I don't see why that'd make a difference,' he said, a little too levelly. 'My boys can cope with anything the galaxy might throw at us.'

'I don't doubt it,' I said. 'From what I've seen we could do with a few more like them in the Guard.' Tarkus nodded as I moved my portside citadel, setting up what I hoped would be a chance to win in another three turns. I waited until he was considering his response before adding: 'But Magos Killian obviously doesn't share my confidence.'

Tarkus almost knocked his ecclesiarch over as he picked it up and moved it, blowing his only chance of blocking my next attack. His jaw clenched.



'It's not a question of confidence,' he said. 'There are... longstanding obligations.'

I perked up at that, as you can imagine, although what sort of pact there might be between an Astartes chapter and the Adeptus Mechanicus I was at a loss to understand. I don't doubt that I would have been able to worm a little more out of Tarkus given time, but I decided not to press him any further that evening (having just set myself up for a comfortable win despite his superior skill at the game, and wanting to savour it), and by the time we'd agreed on for our next joust across the board he was already dead.



**W**ELL, THERE it is.' Killian waved an expansive hand at the armourcrys window which dominated the far end of the ship's lounge. Beyond it the dying star guttered fitfully, casting a dim blue glow over us which reminded me of autumn twilight. A slice of darkness distorted the glowing sphere, the bulk of the planet we'd come so far to reach rising up to take a bite out of it.

The landscape below us was in darkness, but enough of the wan glow of the system's primary leaked across the horizon for me to make out a blasted wasteland, cracked by heat almost impossible to imagine, and riven with impact craters. That alone was a testament to how old this place was, as it must have been left almost smooth by its fiery transformation; the pockmarking of its face would have been the work of aeons. Despite the awful bleakness of the prospect I couldn't deny that it had a desolate grandeur to it, and a faint chill akin to awe touched my soul as I took it all in.

'It's certainly... impressive,' I agreed. Nonetheless a vague sense of unease took hold of me, and I found myself grateful for the thought that I'd be transferring to the Reclaimers' battle barge and leaving this system forever within a day or two.

'We've already begun to establish our base camp,' Killian continued. I strained my eyes in the direction he'd pointed,

failing to see anything for a moment, then picked out a faint flash of light as one of our shuttles ignited its engine many kilometres below. 'I think you'd be impressed.'

'No doubt I would,' I agreed, grateful for the secrecy he'd displayed up to now, which almost certainly meant I wouldn't have to leave the security of the ship. 'But I'm sure you don't want me getting underfoot.'

'Well...' Killian hesitated, clearly torn between conflicting impulses, and not entirely sure whether he was doing the right thing. 'Obviously we're on a mission from the Omnissiah. Normally we wouldn't dream of involving an outsider..' Here it comes, I thought, with an ominous sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. That reputation for heroism is about to hit me over the back of the head again. The techpriest cleared his throat. 'But given your extensive experience as a military man, do you think Lieutenant Tarkus would listen to your opinions at all?'

'Lieutenant Tarkus strikes me as a man who doesn't need much advice from anyone,' I said smoothly, cursing myself for undermining his confidence the previous evening. 'And if he does, I'm sure the Astartes contingent will have far more pertinent comments to make when they get here than anything I might have to say.'

'Well, that's the thing.' Killian coughed delicately again. 'Technically, they'll be led by a sergeant, won't they?'

Of course. And Tarkus would be too stubborn to ask the opinion of a lower ranking squad leader now his pride had been hurt. Notwithstanding the fact that the marine sergeant would probably have decades of combat experience, and refuse to take orders from anyone outside his chapter in any case. I had a sudden premonition of the administrative problems which would be awaiting me on Viridia, and wondered for a moment if I'd done the right thing in volunteering.

Oh well. I might as well get a little practice in now. I had nothing better to do until the barge arrived after all.

'I'll do my best to help, of course,' I said. 'Perhaps if I had a little chat with him?'

'Would you?' Killian snagged a plate of canapes from a passing servitor, and offered me one. 'We'd be very grateful. He's an admirable young man, of course, but rather headstrong.'

'Where is he?' I asked, biting into the delicacy. 'Still in his quarters?'

'Omniissiah no.' Killian smiled, and gestured towards the planet below. 'He's down there.'



**A**S IT HAPPENED that was a stroke of luck which was to save my life, but I had no idea of that at the time, so spent the shuttle ride down to the surface of Interitus Prime feeling resentful at being dragged off on a pointless errand. Technically I had no authority over Tarkus in any case, since he wasn't a member of the Imperial Guard, but Killian didn't seem to think that would matter, sure that the young officer would be sufficiently impressed with my fraudulent reputation to listen to whatever advice I might have to offer. He was also very grateful for my assistance, as he kept telling me from the adjacent seat as we descended, and in the end I found myself feigning interest in the desolate landscape below just to shut him up for a minute or two.

Truth to tell, after a while my interest was becoming genuine, even if it remained somewhat muted. The closer we got to landing, the more forbidding that airless landscape became, smaller craters becoming visible as we got closer to them, and faint spiderwebs of shadow swelling into chasms deep beyond measure and wide enough to swallow a hive block. The shuttle continued to descend, and I began to wonder whether the pilot was paying attention to the altitude, despite knowing it to be a servitor which could by its very nature be nothing but vigilant. There was still the faint possibility of malfunction, of course, and I began to tense subconsciously, waiting for the retros to kick in, but they never did.

'Aren't we getting a little close to the ground now?' I ventured after a while, and Killian smiled lazily.

'I suppose we are,' he said, showing no sign of concern. Well I wasn't going to make a fool of myself in front of the magos, so I simply shrugged with the best expression of casual indifference I could summon up.

'Thought so,' I said. A few moments later the reason for his lack of concern became evident even to me. A grey haze in the distance, which I'd taken for the horizon, began to close in on us, looming over the slowly descending shuttle like a thunderhead, and I nodded in sudden understanding. We were sinking gently into one of those titanic rifts in the planet's surface, already at least a couple of hundred metres below ground level. 'How far down does this go?'

'About eight hundred kilometres,' Killian said casually. 'It's the deepest chasm on the planet.' He produced a flask of something from the depths of his robe with his right hand, the mechadendrites pulling out a cup apiece. 'So we've got time for a recaf before we land if you like.' I did like; under the circumstances I thought I deserved one.

The dim illumination of the dying star above had dwindled to nothing by now, but the running lights of the shuttle were enough to let me pick out a few of the details of that incredible fissure. Layer after layer of different strata slipped past the porthole, subtle graduations of hue marking the ticks of some long wound-down geological clock, and a couple of times I thought I caught a glimpse of something white, fossils perhaps, of creatures already extinct for millions of years before their planet died in its turn. The thought was a morbid one, and I tried to turn my mind away from the contemplation of death and eternity with casual conversation.

'I can see why you think this place is so special,' I ventured after a while. 'It's quite...' I tried in vain to think of a suitable adjective, before concluding somewhat lamely with 'impressive.' Killian chuckled throatily. I have to say that of all the tech-priests I've ever met he was by far the most

likable, as well as the most untypical of his kind. Factors which were probably not unconnected, come to think of it.

'I think we can still surprise you, commissar.' At that point I rather doubted it, to be honest, although I have to concede that he was right.

My first presentiment that there was even more to this chasm than at first met the eye was a faint glow from below us, which soon resolved itself into the actinic glare of several gigantic luminators set on pylons around a makeshift landing pad. Our shuttle settled gently in what seemed to be the exact centre of the flattened area, and Killian bounced from his seat with every sign of eagerness to get outside; it was only as he hit the rune to lower the exit ramp that I remembered the world was airless.

'Wait a minute!' I called, struggling up from the deeply-padded seat which suddenly seemed a lot less comfortable now that I needed to stand in a hurry. He might have some augmetic enhancements that let him manage without air, but I most certainly didn't. Killian smiled at me.

'I told you you'd be surprised,' he said as the seals broke with an audible hiss. But it was the sound of equalising pressure, I realised with a sudden surge of relief, having become all too familiar with the sound of explosive decompression when the *Hand of Vengeance* took a torpedo volley amidships at the siege of Perlia. Thin, cold air began to seep into the shuttle, leeching the warmth away with tendrils of mist. Having spent most of my career with Valhallan units, 'who like their air conditioning turned up to the maximum, I found the chill bearable, but oddly dispiriting.

'I am,' I admitted. 'I didn't think you'd been here long enough to create an atmosphere.' I followed him down the ramp, my boots crunching gently on the gravel beneath, which had something of the texture of ash.

'We haven't.' Killian was rubbing his hands together, although whether for warmth or from enthusiasm I couldn't tell. Probably both. 'So the survey reports were right about that at least.'

'So why haven't the gasses frozen?' I asked. Even if the feeble sun were warm enough to prevent them turning to ice it never penetrated this deep below the surface, and the world was too long dead to have any residual heat left in its core. My breath puffed the words into little clouds as I spoke, although Killian's, I noticed absently, did not.

'Exactly!' Killian said, as though I were his favourite pupil, and led the way between the two nearest linator gantries, following a clearly-defined trail in the brittle ground. Once we were beyond the glare my eyes adjusted, and I could make out a cluster of dimmer lights on the walls of the chasm. 'There has to be something else down here emitting energy. It's the only explanation.'

I was intrigued in spite of myself, I don't mind admitting it. As we approached the lights I could see they were suspended in the mouth of a vast cavern, with servitors scuttling about reinforcing the makeshift ramp of broken shale leading up to it. I'll never know if Killian's enthusiasm would have led him to expound further on what he was after, or if he would have realised he was revealing adeptus secrets to an outsider and clammed up again, because at that point a young tech-priest appeared in the cave mouth gesticulating wildly.

'Magos!' he called, practically jiggling up and down on the spot with excitement. 'We've found something!' Without even pausing to ask what it was, Killian picked up the pace and practically ran inside the gaping hole in the cliff face, which was large enough to have taken our shuttle with room to spare. Not wanting to lose my guide I trotted after him, more than a little intrigued.

My first impression on stepping inside was one of space, which was somewhat disconcerting given the fact that we were so far beneath the planet's surface. More of the huge linator panels stood about that vast expanse of emptiness, casting pools of light which simply served to deepen the shadows surrounding them. White-robed tech-priests were engaged in a variety of tasks which meant nothing to me: hunched over equipment mounted in panels of polished wood and gleaming

brass, examining small metallic objects through a variety of lenses and chanting instructions to humming cogitators in their peculiar high-pitched ceremonial language which seems to consist entirely of whistles and clicks. One group was tending to a mechanism I recognised, a hololithic display of impressive resolution, which was currently showing some peculiar symbols which seemed to consist of circles linked by straight lines. Whatever they were, they were exciting considerable debate.

Killian barely slowed at any of this, hurrying on into the darkness which surrounded that scene of activity. Red-uniformed tech guards were hovering deferentially at the fringes of the illuminated area, and I made a mental note to suggest to Tarkus that they be redeployed a little further out, where their eyes would be adjusted to the surrounding gloom and better able to distinguish any infiltrators moving in on the bustling researchers. Of course there didn't seem the remotest chance of anyone else being here, and for all I knew they had augmetic eyes which could see perfectly well in the dark anyway, but by that stage in my career I was already beginning to acquire the healthy sense of paranoia which has probably done more than anything else to ensure my survival long enough to reach an honourable retirement.

Plunging into the gloom after him I found the way easy enough to negotiate despite the lack of illumination, as he was making more noise than an ork in a distillery. Another patch of light was visible in the distance and I hastened towards it, picking out a cluster of white robes and red uniforms without difficulty. More of the peculiar circle-and-stick markings were embossed on the far wall, and as I moved closer it became obvious that the surface here was worked to a glossy smoothness which somehow seemed to swallow the light falling on it.

'These sigils are undoubtedly of necrontyr origin,' a tall, cadaverous techpriest was saying as I entered the circle of brightness. He broke off to glare at me, until Killian gestured to him to continue. The name meant nothing to me at the time,

of course, although when I finally reported back to Lokris he showed me some highly classified files which did nothing at all to make me feel better. I suppose he thought if something was going to try that hard to kill me without him instigating it, the least he could do was let me know what it was.

'This is all very interesting, Brother Stadler,' Killian said, with every sign of impatience. 'But what about the artifact?'

'It's over here,' Stadler said after a moment, during which I'd made it abundantly clear that I wasn't moving. The circle of light surrounding us shifted a little, moved by some technosorcery I wasn't privy to, revealing the mouth of a tunnel. Like the wall it penetrated the archway was perfectly smooth, composed of stone blocks of an eerie glossy blackness which only served to intensify the darkness beyond. 'We started down the tunnel hoping to find more heiroglyphs, and stumbled over this.' He permitted himself a wintery smile. 'Quite literally, in the case of our escort.'

A couple of red-uniformed figures emerged from the gloom, the scowl on Tarkus's face enough to tell me who the techpriest was referring to. The trooper with him was walking backwards, his hellgun aimed at something still in the darkness beyond, and a moment later a couple of techpriests appeared leading something metallic between them. It was big, I could tell that even before it came into the light, supported by a dozen cyber skulls which had managed to wedge themselves into the interstices of its body. A small, detached part of my mind noted that the cogboys at least must be able to see in the dark, as there was no sign of illumination further back.

'Remarkable!' Killian looked like a juvie on Emperor's Day morning who's just seen the toy soldiers he always wanted at the top of his bowl. I could have thought of a number of other adjectives to describe the thing, starting with 'hideous' and growing steadily more pejorative.

It resembled nothing so much as a metallic sump spider, although even one of those would have seemed cuddly by comparison. Mechanisms protruded from its head, and six limbs dangled from its



bloated body. Even inert it exuded a palpable malevolence which wrapped itself around me like a suffocating blanket.

'What have we here?' Killian bent over it, probing with the mechadendrites. 'Looks like a power core. Completely inert, of course.' He shrugged. 'Pity, but there you go. It would have been interesting to see what it does.' *Interesting* wasn't quite the word I would have used, needless to say. The other techpriest nodded in agreement.

'I dare say we could rig something up. Possibly a fusion bottle...' He seemed to remember my presence all of a sudden, and subsided, glaring at me again.

'Are you sure that's wise?' I asked. Everyone looked at me, and I shrugged, determined not to seem too concerned at their evident hostility. 'I'm no expert, but -'

'Quite right, you're not,' Stadler snapped. 'So kindly leave theological matters to those who are.'

'Fine.' I tried to look as reasonable as I could. 'But might I suggest you at least delay the attempt until the Astartes arrive?' And I was a long way away from any potential danger, of course. 'That should at least minimise any risk to the security of the expedition.'

'The expedition is perfectly secure,' Tarkus cut in, his voice tight, and I cursed myself for wounding his pride all over again. 'I see no reason to delay the furtherance of the Omnissiah's work.'

At that point it all became academic anyway. Killian muttered something under his breath, and a faint click came from somewhere in the bowels of the machine.

'Ah,' he said. 'That looks like a power coupling...'

Without any warning at all, a thin metal probe shot from the depths of the arachnoid automaton and buried itself in one of the hovering cyber skulls. A blue arc of energy sparked between them and the servitor fell lifeless to the ground, bouncing off into a corner somewhere.

'Remarkable!' Killian said again, and stepped forward for a closer look. I did exactly the opposite, you can be sure, retreating just far enough to ensure that Tarkus and his trooper stood between me and the sinister device.

'Stay back!' I warned, drawing my laspistol. Tarkus seemed to remember my reputation at that point, and clearly reasoning that if I was concerned he ought to be too, began to follow suit. The trooper raised his hellgun again.

'Put those down!' Killian was outraged. 'Have you any idea of the importance of this artifact?' Tarkus and the trooper began to obey, although I wasn't about to holster my weapon under any circumstances. Before we could debate the point, however, a loud crack echoed through the cavern. The spider thing had teleported away, leaving air to rush into the void it had occupied like a miniature thunderclap.

We stared at one another in mutual incomprehension for a moment.

'Where did it go?' the trooper asked, an expression of bafflement on his face which was almost comic. I shook my head.

'Emperor alone knows,' I said.

'It must be somewhere nearby,' Killian said. 'How far do these tunnels extend?' Stadler shrugged.

'Kilometres. We've barely begun to map them.' Killian began to look as though his new soldiers had been trodden on by an adult before he got the chance to play with them.

'We'll establish a search pattern,' he said. 'We're bound to find it eventually.'

'If it doesn't find you first,' I added, before I could prevent the words from slipping out. Tarkus, to his credit, took my meaning at once.

'You think it's a guardian of some kind?'

'I don't know,' I admitted. 'But it's a reasonable guess. Whatever it's for it was built to last.'

'I'll double the sentries around the base camp,' Tarkus said. But I already had an uncomfortable feeling that wasn't going to be enough.



**M**Y FIRST instinct, I might as well admit it, was to find some excuse to get back on the shuttle and return to the safety of the orbiting starship. This

wasn't as easy as it sounds, though; despite the fact that I was clearly unwelcome so far as the majority of the techpriests were concerned, and Tarkus remained as prickly as ever, he was sensible enough to realise that someone who'd survived as many clashes with the enemy as I had was someone whose advice he should listen to. So despite my impatience I spent most of the day reviewing his plans for the defence of the camp (which were pretty sound, I'm bound to admit, although I was able to plug a couple of holes that would only have been obvious to someone with field experience), and it was several hours before I had the chance to contact the *Omnissiah's Blessing* and let them know I was on my way back.

I'd just finished talking to the officer of the watch, whose image was floating in the hololith display, when his expression changed.

'Just a moment, commissar.' He turned to confer with someone out of the hololith's field of vision. When he turned back his expression was one of mild surprise. 'We're picking up a discharge of warp energy. It looks like the Astartes are here already.' That was the best news I'd heard since boarding the freighter. I had no doubt they'd make short work of the metal spider, and anything else that might be lurking down here with us.

'Good,' I said. 'If you can arrange to transfer my kit I'll report aboard the barge directly from here.' No point in taking any chances, after all, and I'd certainly be safer scrounging a ride in a Thunderhawk than an unarmed shuttle. The officer just had time to look mildly surprised before his expression turned to one of alarm.

'Unknown contact, closing fast. They're making an attack run!'

'Download your sensor data!' Killian ordered at my elbow. Someone on the bridge must have complied because the image in the hololith changed suddenly, showing us the pin-sharp starfield you only ever see from above an atmosphere. Something was moving across it, a crescent of darkness visible against the blackness of space only because of the

flickering of the stars it briefly occulted.

'What the hell...' I began, then found myself stunned into silence. A burst of light blazed from somewhere within that sinister silhouette, branching and spreading as it came, until an instant later it enveloped our point of view. The hololith went blank.

'They've gone!' Stadler was standing at a nearby lectern, his face lined with shock.

'They can't be,' I said, already feeling the truth of his words in the pit of my stomach. Killian nodded in confirmation.

'I'm afraid he's right. All we're picking up is a cloud of debris.'

'Then we're just going to have to sit tight,' I said, fighting to keep my voice calm. 'The Astartes ship will be here soon, and it ought to be more than a match for these raiders.' I wished I was as confident as I sounded. 'So long as nobody panics we'll be fine.'

But of course we weren't.



**T**HE FIRST ATTACK came an hour or so later, while I was talking to Tarkus about the possibility of barricading the tunnel mouth we'd found. It would only have been a token gesture, of course, but one of the first things they teach you at the schola is that anything you can do to make the troops feel they're taking the initiative is good for morale. And, needless to say, after the casual destruction of our ship, morale was pretty low. We'd been reviewing the available supplies, hoping to find something we could use, when Tarkus broke off in mid-conversation.

'Can you hear that?' he asked. I nodded. A faint scuttling sound had been tickling my eardrums for the last few moments, but until he mentioned it my subconscious had been editing it out. It was a sound I was so familiar with I could identify it without thinking.

'It's just vermin,' I said. In my extensive experience of underground passageways it had been a constant background noise. Then I remembered how desolate this world was, and that we'd seen no sign of life since we got here. I drew my las-pistol slowly. Tarkus followed suit, picking up a nearby luminator with his other hand and pointing it into the surrounding darkness.

My first impression was that the floor was moving, the beam shining back from a rippling surface which reminded me of sunlight on ocean waves, and then with a cry of revulsion I began shooting. The metallic carpet which surged towards us was composed of miniature duplicates of the spider machine, thousands of them, and the las-bolts detonated in the middle of the swarm with about as much effect as if I'd been throwing stones. True, every shot was rewarded with a satisfying impact and a spray of metal, but there were so many that even with Tarkus's help I couldn't even hope to slow them down.

'First squad to me!' the lieutenant ordered, and within seconds we'd been joined by half a score of his redshirts, who directed a withering volley of hellgun fire at the scuttling swarm. They began to break, to my momentary relief, but only to part like the tide around a rock before rushing on towards the main bulk of the camp.

They hit it like a tsunami, swarming over the precious equipment and ripping it to pieces with their metallic mandibles. Guards and techpriests alike scattered in panic, but many were too slow, being pulled down and engulfed by that hideous carpet of scuttling death. Within seconds a few muffled screams, quickly silenced, were the only traces of their presence left.

'Pull back!' I ordered, taking command by reflex as I'd been trained to do. A few scattered survivors regrouped around us, Killian and Stadler among them. The cadaverous techpriest's eyes were wide as he watched the swarm of automata demolishing the camp.

'Merciful Omnissiah!' he gasped. 'What are those things?'

'Beats me,' I said. 'I'm not qualified to comment on theological matters.' It was a cheap shot, and I suppose I ought to be ashamed of myself, but I must admit to taking some quiet satisfaction in his venomous expression. I began edging the ragged group back towards the wall, hoping that with our backs to it at least the machines couldn't get behind us.

'Good thinking,' Tarkus agreed, fanning his remaining subordinates out to form a skirmishing screen between us and the scuttling horrors. Stadler reached that obsidian surface first, and pressed his back against it as though hoping he could squeeze an extra couple of millimetres of space out of the cavern.

All at once his expression changed to one of astonishment, blood and lubricants fountaining from his augmented body as something invisible slashed him to pieces from behind. I whirled, seeking a target, and suddenly saw it looming over his shattered corpse. A ghastly skeletal visage hovered in the air on gently humming grav units, the razor-edged blades of its fingers stained crimson, its torso ending in a long, curved tail which looked like vertebrae. To add to the horror the apparition was constructed of the same gleaming metal as the spider and its miniature offspring.

'It came through the wall!' One of the troopers was gibbering in shock, his face white, at least the parts of it which were still composed of flesh. 'It came through the wall!' He raised his hellgun and ripped off a burst on full auto. The entity drifted forwards unhurriedly, the flurry of las-bolts detonating against the wall behind it, defacing the enigmatic symbols etched there. With a deepening sense of horror I realised that the volley had been on target, but the las-bolts had simply passed through the apparition, whatever it was. The trooper was still firing, his finger clamped on the trigger in a rictus of panic, as the drifting horror reached out casually and tore his face off. The man's screams were abruptly terminated as the thing's tail lashed up to transfix him; his spasming corpse hung there for a moment before dropping to the floor again.

The group disintegrated immediately, troopers and techpriests alike fleeing in panic whichever way their feet took them. I laid a restraining hand on Killian's arm as the metallic ghoul accelerated after them, casually slashing down a couple of victims as it passed.

'Stay put!' I snapped. 'These things are trying to panic you!' The strategy was obvious: split everyone up and hunt us down one by one. If we stayed together we could watch one another's backs, and greatly increase our chances of survival.

Tarkus had clearly realised this too.

'Regroup!' he was bellowing, despite the obvious disinclination of any of his men to follow orders. Hellguns spat almost at random, a few of the las bolts actually managing to hit the hovering ghoul as it solidified for long enough to eviscerate another unfortunate cogboy, but the vast majority of shots passed through it or missed altogether. 'Reform at once, you sons of—'

His voice broke off abruptly, rising to a suddenly terminated scream, as a bolt of vivid green light enveloped him. For a moment I could see a bloody mess of internal organs as he seemed to fade away from the outside in, dwindling like candle wax, and then he was gone as though he'd never existed.

'Emperor on Earth!' I turned to see what fresh horrors this place had disgorged, and a sudden rush of terror hit me in the gut. Thin, skeletal automata were advancing across the cavern, casually blasting everything that still lived with those hideous beams. Wherever those messengers of death walked people died, dwindled to nothing by their hellish guns, or sliced apart by the combat blades attached to the barrels.

To give them their due the tech guards gave a good account of themselves in the main, their hellguns felling two or three of their assailants, but it seemed to take a lot of fire to down one. I even saw one with its chest blown open stir and rise to its feet again, the eldritch metal of which it was composed flowing like liquid to heal its wounds.

'Frak this!' I said, dragging the magos towards the mouth of the tunnel. If we stayed where we were we'd be killed with the others, but there was a remote chance that we might find some kind of refuge if we slipped away while these ghastly automata were slaughtering our companions. All we had to do, I kept telling myself, was hold on until the Astartes arrived. How we'd know they were here, or let them know we'd survived, was a problem for later which I resolutely refused to consider right now.

To my astonishment we made it to the tunnels without further mishap, and I hurried Killian along as rapidly as I could, the sounds of carnage diminishing in our ears. The slick black stone seemed to absorb sound as well as light, silence descending around us like a shroud. My old hive boy's senses were sufficiently acute for me to be able to tell from the subtle change in the echoes around us when we passed the openings of cross corridors, but on several occasions I was grateful for my companion's apparent ability to see in the dark.

At least the metallic warriors were easy to evade, their hellish weapons giving off an eerie green glow which forewarned us of their presence in plenty of time to dive for cover.

It was after we'd been wandering for some time that I noticed the darkness around me was beginning to attenuate, a diffuse green refulgence becoming visible from up ahead. At first I thought it was merely another patrol but after lurking cautiously for a moment and finding that it remained unchanged in its intensity, we pressed on. Killian was curious to discover the source, still hoping to bag a piece of archeotech probably, and if I was going to have to fight again I preferred to do it where I could see what was trying to kill me.

As the glow grew brighter I began to hear something too, a faint buzzing sound which resonated in my skull and set my teeth on edge. The palms of my hands began to tingle as we reached a chamber bathed in that sick, green glow, and a faint sense of nausea rose within me.



Killian, on the other hand, seemed enraptured. The cavern was vast, even larger, if that were possible, than the one we'd first discovered, but rather than being empty was stuffed with strange devices beyond my ability to comprehend. Most were emitting that strange, necrotic light, however, and I began to apprehend that it was somehow connected to their power source.

'Fascinating.' The techpriest wandered into the centre of the room, his eyes darting everywhere, trying to take in every detail of his surroundings. Mine, on the other hand, were concerned only with making sure we were alone. At least we appeared to be safe in that assumption...

Abruptly the light flared, and a sudden thundercrack of displaced air echoed across that unholy room. A dozen of the skeletal warriors were suddenly standing on a raised dais before a curtain of rippling green light, and turning their expressionless heads towards us.

'A warp portal!' Killian seemed transfixed. 'We've known it's a theoretical possibility of course, but...'

'Fight now, talk later!' I screamed, certain we were staring death in the face and determined to defy it for as long as possible. As I unleashed a flurry of lasbolts at the nearest figure I could see that its torso was already damaged, a couple of holes punched through it by what looked like armour piercing rounds. I hadn't noticed any bolters among the tech guards' armoury, but I was glad of somebody's foresight as one of my rounds entered the gap and blew the automaton apart from the inside. The others all lifted their greenly-glowing weapons as one, and aimed them at me; for an instant the conviction of my own immanent death left me paralysed.

'Get down!' Killian cannoned into me the instant they fired, knocking me to one side, and taking the full force of the barrage himself. He flashed into vapour in an instant, leaving me rolling across the floor towards those murderous statues. I raised my right hand to aim the las-pistol and found it was gone, along with two of my fingers, but there was no

time to worry about that now. My survival instinct had kicked in like never before and I lunged desperately past the dreadful automata, a direction they never expected me to take, diving headfirst into the curtain of energy behind them.

You might be wondering how anyone could be so foolish, but consider: remaining where I was would be certain death, there was absolutely no doubt about that, whereas taking my chances with the portal meant death was only virtually assured. And it was that narrow difference which preserved me for long enough to record this account.


The actual passage was a timeless instant: one moment I was in the chamber below the bowels of Interitus Prime, the next I found myself surrounded by the noise of combat. The light, wherever I was, was the same bilious hue, but the chamber I was now in was far smaller, and, as I was subsequently to discover, my immediate guess that I was aboard the starship which had attacked our freighter was an accurate one.

Staccato explosions echoed from the sloping walls surrounding me and I rolled to my feet, dazed, as another of the metal warriors came at me. I tried to draw my chainsword, but stumbled, weak from the loss of blood, and would surely have fallen had not a vast forearm encased in ceramite swung out of nowhere to bear me up. A storm bolter barked about a metre away, deafening me for a moment, and tearing the gleaming assassin to shreds.

'Brother-captain. I've found a survivor,' a voice louder than any I'd previously heard boomed, and I turned to find myself in the grasp of a giant, encased in a suit of terminator armour.

'Bring him,' a second giant said, looming into view from behind another of the incomprehensible alien devices. 'The demolition charges are set.'

Despite everything, I found a smile beginning to force its way onto my face.

'You took your time,' I said, and promptly passed out. 

Imperium File 752-902139.721.56  
ref 721.73 Alien Weapons: Eldar

15: Earthshaker inflicted damage

The resilience of this craft is shown by the limited amount of damage sustained after a direct hit

1: Energy field generator

2: Grilled engine air intake

3: Crew canopy

The craft is controlled by two flight crew.  
The mechanisms appear to indicate pilot  
and navigator/gunner roles.

4: Crew life support systems

These appear isolated from the rest  
of the craft. This should mean that  
damage to the transport hold does  
not affect the flight crew.

5: Scatter laser

wings design.

The Imperium outpost Carthagensis 7/ag, within the Segmentum Tempestus, was the victim of a vicious surprise attack by Eldar forces. The monstrous enemy descended from orbit in a multitude of craft, and assaulted the Imperial positions. Only by great fortitude, sacrifice and with the blessing of the most exalted Emperor did our troops win the day. One of the most prevalent enemy craft was overrun on the ground, and captured almost intact. Commonly identified as a 'Vampire Raider', I hereby present the archives of the Adeptus Mechanicus with my initial exploration of this strange vessel.

In Loyal Servitude,

Tech-Priest Adept Grauis Markus

*Facta Non Verba - Deeds Not Words*

## Observations

The primary role of this enemy craft appears to be as a transporter. It can operate in deep space, yet also pass through the atmosphere and make swift runs to a drop zone.

This ability seems to be utilised for raiding and insurgency operations. It provides our enemy with a very flexible strike and redeployment ability.

Furthermore their armament is sufficient to provide good tactical support whilst their super-heavy nature makes them very hard to destroy.

### 9: Pods

the energy field generation.

### 13: Stabilising fin

great maneuverability

### 12: Transport hold

craft. The rear door is hinged to act as a ramp when lowered. Note also the air intake and atmosphere control built into the upper hull

### 11: Wing structure

semi-circular formations. The structure allows for easy integration of necessary cabling for control functions.

### 10: Three wing-mounted engines

of or and atmospheric flight. They are arranged in a triangular

suggest the option of jet propulsion.

### 8: Craftworld markings

Currently unidentified.

### 5: Twin linked pulse lasers

Mounted on each wing this armament provides strong assault facility, with a good forward firing arc.

### 7: Targetting array

linked to the twin lasers own range-finder this

ability for range projection.

### 6: Wing ribbing

has an aerodynamic function

## Data Profile

Height: 7.1m

Wingspan: 13.2m

Armour: 8-10mm (unknown material, but appears equal to 30-45mm Imperial armour)

Max Speed (estimated): 3200kph

Armament: Pair of pulse lasers per wing  
Single scatter laser on nose

Has Est Hr Fh Hosts Docer

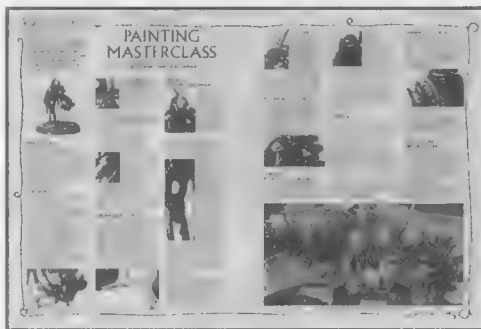
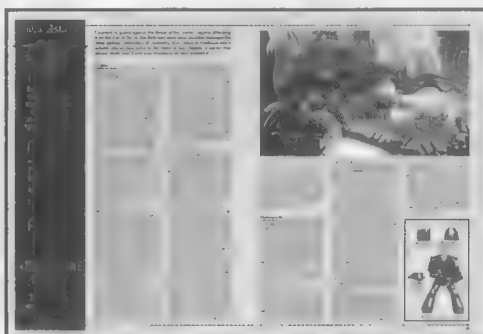
It Is Right To Learn Even From An Enemy

# WHITE DWARF



White Dwarf is Games Workshop's monthly gaming magazine. Each issue showcases all the latest games and miniatures. It is packed with exciting articles including valuable tactical advice on how to get the most from your army on the field of battle, tips for painting, converting and modelling your miniatures, terrain building articles and tense battle reports highlighting the trials and tribulations of commanding an army. You can find out more at the White Dwarf web site:

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# The Vampire Hunters

A terrifying tale of the children of the night by Robert Earl

THE WIND CAME fleeing down from the dark wastes of the north. It clamored outside the tavern with a thousand phantom voices, each of them begging for admittance. The men within could feel its hunger as they sat, hungry themselves, around the smoldering fire.

At first they had tried to ignore the storm's plaintive wailing. When that had proved impossible they had tried to talk over it and drown it out with forced good humour. But winter had soon frozen their conversation just as surely as it had frozen the village well. So now they just sat, and listened, and tried not to think of the things that waited outside.

It was difficult. When the wind clawed at the rough-hewn pine of the walls, how could they not be reminded of other, stronger fingers? And when it tore at the reeds of the roof, burrowing its way down like a wolf into a hare's nest, who amongst them could help wondering what might be coming with it? And when it screamed... Well, when it screamed then it was time for more vodka, and to hell with making it last the winter.

Yet still, despite their fear, they remained calm and resolved. They were, after all, Kislevites, and generations of hardship had forged them into a race not easily broken. Even when the first blow was struck upon the oak door, hard enough to ring the icy wood like a bell, they didn't panic. They merely unsheathed their long skinning knives and waited, eyes glinting warily in the firelight.

One long, breathless moment stretched into the next.

The wind howled.

As if in sympathy, the fire flared up, the light of the dancing flames gleaming on the knives of the waiting men. Grigori, the tavern keeper, watched the door and

chewed the white whiskered tip of his drooping moustache. Although his comrades mocked him because of the mannerism, it was a habit he'd never been able to break, even after forty years of trying.

'Perhaps,' Danovich ventured, his voice little more than a whisper, 'it was just a stray branch.'

'Perhaps,' Piotre agreed, doubtfully. Grigori, still chewing, said nothing.

Another knock, harder this time, beat against the door, and the men jumped like three puppets on a single string.

'Anybody in there?' a voice yelled, struggling to rise above the wind.

Danovich and Piotre looked at Grigori. He shrugged before rising and walked over to the door; his two friends huddled close behind.

He took a deep breath and pulled out the loose rivet that served him as a spy hole.

Outside there was nothing but the swirling snow, gray beneath the light of a dying sun and a tall figure, standing with his back to the door, shivering beneath his cloak.

'Who's that?' Grigori demanded, squinting out into the half-light.

'Calixte Lesec,' the figure replied, turning back to the door, 'and my man-servant, Viento.'

'Man-servant, my arse!' a voice grumbled from somewhere out of sight.

'Can we come in?'

Grigori hesitated.

'This is the village of Novograd, isn't it?' the stranger persisted.

'It is,' Grigori allowed.

'Then we have business. We met a young man called Petrokov on the road, and he...'

Grigori slammed back the bolts and dragged the door open.

'Come in, come in,' he cried, beckoning the two travellers into the tavern. The wind surged in gleefully behind them as they bundled inside, red faced and glowing with the icy chill of winter. Grigori shouldered the door shut before turning to greet his guests.

'Grigori Calinescu,' he said, offering his hand.

'Calixte Lesec,' the stranger said, shaking it. His cold fingers were thin and smooth, almost effeminate, but there was nothing effeminate about his face. True, it was smooth and fine-boned, from temples to cheekbones to cleanly shaved chin. But there was a hardness apparent in every line that spoke of strength, not fragility. Grigori wondered how old the newcomer was.

'Viento,' the second man said, thrusting out his hand.

'Pleased to meet you.' The tavern keeper nodded, surprised at how similar the two men were. Perhaps they were brothers. 'Come, give me your coats and take a seat by the fire. These are my friends, Piotre and Danovich. Piotre, will you get our guests a drink and some stew while I see to their horses?'

'We have no horses, I'm afraid.' Calixte said, waving his hand in airy dismissal. There was arrogance in the gesture that the tavern keeper didn't care for. After all, he was a free man, not a serf. Still, this was no time to be taking slights. There were more pressing issues.

'And you need not worry about food,' Viento added, patting his belly and winking at his host 'That's where our last horse went little more than an hour ago. A shame, if we'd known we were so near... Well, no matter.'

'Well then,' Grigori said, 'you'll take a drink with us at least.'

'Glad to.' Calixte smiled, baring a set of perfect white teeth.

Grigori went to the counter and filled two cups. He managed to hold back the question that had been burning within him until they had clinked the pottery together and drunk a toast to the Tsarina.

'How long ago did you meet my son?' he asked, even as the fiery spirit burned its way down his throat.

'Petrokov was your son?' Calixte asked. 'I see now why you were so keen to welcome us in. Not that you wouldn't have been anyway, of course.'

Again, that tone of condescension. Grigori ignored it and waited for an answer. Calixte took another drink before obliging him.

'We met him two days ago, on the road to Kislev. It was dusk, so we shared a fire and a meal. That's when he told us of your, ah, problem.'

'So you know? Good, good. But where is Petrokov, now?'

'Don't sound so worried, old man.' Viento chipped in with a patronizing grin. 'He's quite safe. He went on to Kislev.'

'Yes. You see, when he told us of your problem we weren't really interested. No offence, obviously, but we like to be paid in gold, not food and lodging.'

'After all, we're warriors, not plough horses!' Viento exclaimed, and laughed loudly at his own witticism. Piotre and Danovich smiled weakly. Grigori ignored him.

Calixte shook his head and looked apologetically at the tavern keeper before continuing.

'Anyway, the day after we had bid your son farewell, this weather started. We come from the south, you see, and didn't expect it. So we thought that, as we're not going to be able to make it to anywhere civilized until the snows let up, we might as well take up Petrokov's offer. If it still stands, of course.'

'Oh, it still stands,' Grigori said. He realized that he was sucking the tip of his moustache again and hastily spat it out. 'A season's food and board if you kill that... that thing.'

'Thing? You mean the vampire?'

Piotre and Danovich glanced nervously at the door, as if the very mention of the daemon would summon him like a rabbit from a conjuror's hat. Grigori restrained himself, focusing instead of his guest. The young man seemed to be genuinely sanguine about the idea of taking on such a foe. Relaxed, even. It occurred to Grigori that if this was no more than arrogance, then sending the young fool out might do more harm than good.

'Tell me, Lesec...'

'Please, call me Calixte.'

'Calixte, then. Have you ever fought against a... a vampire before?'

'Yes. On occasion. They are terrible to behold, I know. Wonderful and terrible. They are like life. Or rather, life magnified until it becomes unbearable.' Grigori was surprised at the sadness in his guests tone 'But their weaknesses are as great as their strengths. Even a flame which burns as brightly as the sun can be extinguished.'

'You sound as though you sympathize with them,' the tavern keeper said. Calixte shrugged unapologetically.

'I hunt them. Don't you love the deer your arrows find?'

'Yes.'

'Well then.'

'I meant no offence.'

'Of course not. Don't trouble yourself.' Calixte smiled, his teeth white in the gloom of the tavern. 'Now, what of this vampire? Which of the blood lines is it of?'

'Blood lines?'

'Yes. Which, ah, family?'

Grigori exchanged a puzzled look with his friends.

'I don't know about its family,' the tavern keeper admitted 'Or even that a vampire could have such a thing. Do you think that their might be more than one, then?'

'No, I meant... it doesn't matter. Can you tell me what it looks like?'

Grigori nodded, shifting uncomfortably.

'It is bigger than a man, maybe as big as an ogre. And strong. It tore the door to the Bodoyen's cabin off steel hinges then flung it twenty yards. By the Tsarina, I hope they didn't suffer.' Grigori muttered, the vision of that massacre rising like some dead thing from the pool of his memory. There had been eight of them packed into their cabin, three generations of the same family. Yet when he had called around with the grandfather's monthly jar of vodka, the hovel had been empty, as hollow as a bone with the marrow sucked out.

'And it's cunning, too.' The tavern keeper dragged his mind away from the image. 'It took Ilyich and Radan, and they were nobody's fools. Even when they were drunk they moved through the forest like

ghosts, letting it whisper its secrets to them like an old friend. We lost them in the first week of winter. Nothing left of them but blood on the snow. Gods, but I've never seen a brighter red.'

'Yes,' Calixte said thoughtfully. 'And when did it start hunting here?'

'Autumn,' Grigori said, tonelessly. 'That's when it killed the peddler. We found him floating in the shallows of the river, drained. That's how we knew that it was a... vampire.'

'And have you seen it?' Calixte prompted gently, his arrogance gone now, replaced by a sort of breathless eagerness.

'Not me, but my friend, Ivan. He was checking his snares up by the Bear's Teeth when he saw the thing. Big, like I said. Naked, with muscles like knotted rope. Almost like a man, except for the head.'

'The head?'

'Yes. He said it was like a bat's, a giant bat's but without the fur.'

'Let me talk to this man Ivan.'

'You can't. He's gone.'

'Gone?'

'Dead. Suicide.'

The crackling of the fire grew loud in the silence that followed. Grigori stared numbly into its depths. You bastard Ivan, he thought. Why didn't you come and talk to me?

'Why?'

'What?' Startled from his reverie Grigori looked up, seeing the eagerness in Calixte's face.

'Why did he kill himself?'

'The vampire was carrying a child when he saw it. A little girl. She was screaming, he said. And even after the vampire had passed his hiding place and taken her down into the labyrinth he could hear her screaming still. Even when he got home. Even at night. So...' The tavern keeper waved his hand helplessly.

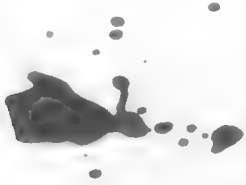
Calixte and Viento exchanged a hungry glance.

'Excellent,' said Calixte, rubbing his hands together with glee. He might have been a small child looking forward to a treat. 'Then we know where the strigoi lives. A hole in the ground. How typical!'

Once more Viento laughed, loudly and alone.

'Tomorrow morning you will take us to this place,' Calixte decided 'Until then we will sleep. Where are our beds?'

'This way,' Grigori said, rising to his feet. It was no longer in him to resent the mercenary's arrogance. His thoughts were too full of Ivan's hanging body and his son's lonely ride to Kislev.



THE NIGHT WAS long. Although he tried to sleep, Grigori found himself staring blindly at the smoke stained rafters above his cot. It was partly the cold of the draughty loft that stole his rest, partly the sweaty heat of his horrible and nebulous nightmares. Most of all, it was the thought of what he must do tomorrow: what he must face.

Yet when the grey light of dawn did finally come he felt relief more than anything, relief that the waiting was over.

Calixte and Viento were up before him.

'Ah, there you are,' Calixte nodded to him as he made his way down to the tavern room. 'I was about to wake you. Well, come along then. Let's be off.'

Grigori tried to restrain his usual early morning temper.

'We'll go when I've eaten,' he growled, pushing past the two would-be vampire hunters to breathe fresh life back into the fire. That done, he put on water for his porridge and measured out a spoon of dried tea leaves into a mug; after a moment's thought he added another, and then a lump of precious honey. It had come all the way from distant Lustria, according to the peddler who had sold it to him. He had been saving it for a special occasion, but somehow he couldn't shake off the feeling that if he didn't use it now he never would.

'How long will it take you to get ready?' Calixte snapped. Grigori sipped his tea and tried not to smile at the young man's show of nerves. How often had he seen it before,

this transformation from fearless warrior to hapless soldier as tavern nights gave way to cold mornings?

'Let an old man finish his porridge and we'll be gone. Have no fear, we'll be there soon enough.'

Grigori was scraping his bowl clean when Piotre and Danovich arrived. With one look at their faces the tavern keeper knew why they had come. He was proud of them.

'Good morning,' Piotre said, swallowing nervously and trying to smile.

'Morning,' Grigori replied. Calixte and Viento grunted.

'Have some porridge?' Grigori offered.

'No, I... no,' Danovich muttered, looking a little queasy.

Conversation stopped so that the only sounds were Grigori's slurping, the hiss of the fire and the tap of Viento's boots as he paced nervously up and down the room.

'Right,' Grigori said, pushing his bowl away. 'If you gentlemen will just give me five minutes for a pipe, then we can begin.'

Calixte sighed theatrically and rolled his eyes.

'I'm ready when you are,' Piotre said, miserably.

'You two are going nowhere,' Grigori told him.

'We want to come with you,' Danovich muttered, unconvincingly.

'Rubbish. Why hire a dog when you can bark yourself?' Grigori inhaled a lungful of smoke and watched Calixte. But if he had heard the insult he gave no sign; he merely beat his fingertips against the well-tooled leather of his scabbard.

'It's-' Piotre began, but Grigori cut him off.

'You're not going,' he said, taking another pull on his pipe. He waited until the bowl was empty before pulling himself to his feet. He handed Piotre the key to the tavern and headed out into the snow.

His two friends watched him go as he led the mercenaries away into the distance. Between the vast grey slabs of sky and snow, the three dark figures looked tiny. Hopeless.

'Good old Grigori,' Danovich said with a sigh of relief.



Piotre grunted, and together they returned to the warmth of the tavern.



THE WINDS OF the night before had dwindled and died. Now the air lay still and sullen, as thick as oil beneath the towering weight of the snow clouds above.

Despite the oppressive weather, Grigori felt strangely light-hearted. As he swished through the snow, plodding along on his favorite snowshoes, he caught himself humming. At one point he even began to whistle, the tuneless note drawing stares of disapproval from Calixte and Viento.

And quite right, too, Grigori thought. In this silent wilderness, such shrill noises could bring only disaster.

He looked back at his two companions. They were making heavy going across the snow, stomping and backsliding and kicking up great drifts. More than once he had suggested a rest stop, but the two mercenaries were intent on pushing on.

The tavern keeper was a little surprised by their perseverance, and a new respect for them began to grow. They must be fit indeed to be able to keep up with him whilst stumbling along like that.

Midday came. The sun glowered low and unseen beyond the snow fogged horizon, and they reached the outer tendrils of the Staslav forest. An ocean of black pine stretched, as far as Grigori knew, right up to the edge of the world.

'We'll stop here,' he told his companions, halting on the top of a ridge.

'No, let's press on,' Calixte said, with hardly a trace of the breathlessness Grigori expected. 'We want to take this strigoi during the day. They're weaker then.'

'So I've heard,' Grigori nodded. 'Five minutes won't matter, though. I want to rest and eat something before the last leg.'

For a moment he thought that Calixte was going to argue, but the young man just grunted with barely disguised ill grace and turned to Viento.

'Won't this animal be surprised to see us?' he said, gloating as if their prey was already dead.

'Yes indeed,' his partner agreed with a strange little giggle.

Grigori, chewing on a strip of dried venison, watched the two of them. For the hundredth time he found himself wondering at their confidence. They were hard men, yes: strong and well armed. Yet their eagerness to meet this monster, in its own lair, too, seemed strange.

'Are you ready yet, old man?' Calixte suddenly asked, shifting his weight from one leg to the other in a dance of impatience.

'Yes,' Grigori said, finishing his lunch with a swig of vodka. 'No more speaking, now. We're barely half a mile away.'

'Fine, fine. Off we go then.'

The tavern keeper stood, stretched, and led them into the deepening gloom of the forest.

They went slowly. Even beneath the triumphant sun of high summer the twisting paths that linked one pine pillared cavern to the next remained dim and shadow haunted. Now, roofed with snow, Grigori found that he could hardly see. Had he not hunted within this realm for the last half a century he would have found it impossible to find the way.

As it was, he merely found it difficult. It took little more than an hour for them to reach the jagged grey walls of the Bear's Teeth; granite towers thrown up to loom menacingly over the threesome.

Cupping his hands, the tavern keeper leant forward to whisper into Calixte's ear.

'This is the place. Look there, between the first two teeth. Do you see it? The entrance to the caves.'

Calixte nodded, eyes shining in the gloom as he studied the cave.

'Well done, old man,' he hissed, baring sharp, white teeth in a hungry grin.

'Wait for us here.'

'I'll come with you, I reckon,' Grigori replied.

'No need.'

'You'll be hard pressed to find your way out without me.'

The two vampire hunters exchanged a glance. With a fine boned hand, Viento smoothed a mocking smile off his perfect face. Calixte rolled his eyes.

'Very well. But stay well back.'

'Agreed.'

Cautiously now, hardly making a sound as they picked their way across the snow, the three men closed in on the cave. As they reached the mouth, Grigori reached out to stop Calixte.

'Torches,' he mouthed, unslinging his bundle. Again Calixte and Viento exchanged a glance, the wordless communication of men who have hunted long together, and Calixte shrugged his assent. With a strike of steel on flint Grigori lit his torch, the smell of burning pitch sharp in the cold air. He then followed the two mercenaries as they descended into the blackness beyond.

They moved quickly into the depths, their feet finding silent purchase as they glided forward. Grigori stumbled behind them. He began to sweat with the effort of keeping up.

The torch he held flickered and flared in the drafts that followed them into the fastness of the labyrinth. It painted sudden, looming shadows onto the crumbling walls that sent the tavern keeper's heart galloping into many a false alarm.

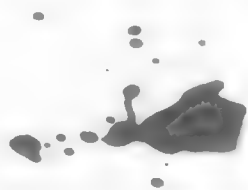
Somehow, the vampire hunters ahead of him seemed to have little need of this treacherous light. They bounded forward into the darkness with all the eagerness of unleashed hunting dogs, their supposed guide forgotten as he struggled along in their wake. And even now, as the rain-smoothed stone of the upper reaches began to give way to crumbling shale, the rush of the two men remained as silent and effortless as that of a cat's across a deep carpet.

Grigori, wincing every time he kicked a stone or sent an alarm of shifting shingles echoing around the labyrinth, began to wish he hadn't come. The realization of how badly he had underestimated these two mercenaries was followed by the knowledge that he was becoming a hindrance rather than a help.

Ahead of him, black and orange in the uncertain light of his torch, Grigori saw that a fall of stone had all but blocked the passage. Calixte and Viento hardly broke their pace as they ascended the barrier. Floating upwards like two dark clouds, they disappeared into the blackness beyond.

Grigori, biting back a curse, wiped the sweat from his brow and followed them up the scree. Moving as cautiously as he could, testing each jagged handhold before resting his weight upon it, he crawled laboriously upwards. Even so, by the time he had crested the top of the mound he had sent the echoes of at least a dozen falling stones chasing each other into the labyrinth beyond.

Still struggling to remain quiet, he worked his way down to the other side of the barrier. At last, with a sense of blessed relief, he felt himself once more on solid ground. After spending a moment tending to his torch he looked up and around in the renewed light. He was completely alone.



'**B**E CALM,' he told himself nervously, trapping the tip of his moustache between his incisors and biting down. 'Be calm.'

Trying to ignore the accelerating beat of his heart, Grigori fought the temptation to turn and run. Instead he put one foot in front of the other and lurched reluctantly onwards. As he did so, a mad urge to call out to his companions seized him. It was as attractive and horrifying as the urge he sometimes felt to throw himself off the high precipices of the spring pastures.

'Gods give me strength,' he muttered, blinking a stinging drop of cold sweat out of one eye. 'They can't be far off.'

Yet in the absolute silence of this deep cavern, the only sound was the pumping of his own blood in his ears, the only sight that of shadow and stone. Pressing on, Grigori fought the impression that he was totally alone.

'They can't be far,' he told himself. Repeating the phrase over and over like a mantra, he marched miserably onwards.

After a few hours, or perhaps it was minutes, he felt himself becoming calmer. After all, he had been down here before, many times. He and his father had used these caves as a food cache, just as he had with Petrokov. And as a boy he'd often come down here with his friends, using the claustrophobic depths to test each others' courage. The wind-burnt leather of his face wrinkled into a smile as he remembered jumping out to frighten Piotre, almost a lifetime ago. How the boy had screamed!

Lost in a fog of long forgotten reminiscences the old man trudged on. He remembered hunts and feasts and fights, won and lost. He remembered his wife, dead these eight years past. He remembered Petrokov's birth.

Then the first rumour of his enemy's approach reached him and he remembered why he was here.

It was not footstep or challenge that warned him of the monster's approach. Instead, it was a whispering out of the darkness: a rapid, scuttling rush that was as staccato and insistent as a crone's knitting needles. It echoed around the labyrinth, stroking cold sweat out of Grigori's skin even as it clenched his stomach into a tight fist of nausea.

With a start, the tavern keeper realized that the sound was coming from behind him, blocking any chance of retreat.

'It must be Calixte,' he lied to himself, spinning clumsily around to face his pursuer.

His torch flared defiantly as it swept it through the air. For a moment its guttering light chased the shadows all the way back to the fall of rocks, the barrier over which Grigori had lost the two vampire hunters. He was beginning to suspect that he'd lost them for good.

The scuttling grew louder, scratching the inside of Grigori's skull.

Reaching for his belt the old man drew his knife. No great sword, this, no weapon for a hero. But it was sharp. Over the years he had honed it down to a sliver of blade that fit snugly beneath his forearm, stretching from Grigori's wrist to his elbow

just as neatly as if it were cousin to the bone beneath. Even in the darkness of these depths it gleamed with a dull menace.

Now the patter of claws upon stone seemed closer than the rockslide. Much closer.

Grigori narrowed his eyes, squinting into every shadowed corner, but there was no movement other than that caused by the flickering of his torch.

The old man curled the fist that held the knife backwards, trying to hide the blade behind his sleeve. If he could manage just one slash at this monster... well, who knew?

Now the clatter of claws was so loud that it couldn't be coming from more than a dozen feet away.

'Invisible, are you?' Grigori whispered, teeth bared defiantly.

It drew closer. Faster.

'Where are you?' the old man whispered, eyes flitting nervously from side to side, hunting through the shadows.

Then he looked up.

It was almost upon him, the twisted bulk of its form hanging like rotten fruit from the jagged ceiling of the cave. Even though it was twisting and swinging from one handhold to another, it was terrifyingly quick, filled with all the twitching eagerness of a cockroach.

There was nothing remotely human about it. It had two arms and two legs, true, and the muscles which writhed beneath its leprous skin had their own counterparts on Grigori's own frame, but crawling forward on taloned feet and hands, torchlight gleaming blackly on its carapace of a hide, it looked like nothing so much as a massive insect.

A massive and hungry insect, Grigori thought, stumbling backwards away from it. As he did so, the torch flared and the vampire's head, which had so far been hidden in the shadows, emerged into the light.

Grigori, for the first time since childhood, screamed.

Ivan had described its head as bat-like. It was as good a comparison as any sane man might make: the sharp, ragged ears, the vicious little wrinkle of a snout, sneering over a splintered mouthful of razor-sharp

teeth, the tiny, sunken eyes, they all had something of the rodent about them.

There was something more, though, something about the things face that spoke of a horror beyond the power of any natural creature to inspire. Perhaps it was something to do with the intelligence that leered out of the blood red pits of its eyes, an intelligence that was both more and less than human.

Grigori stared stupidly at the thing as it closed the last few feet that separated them. Its mad, insect rush slowed now, as if the beast was gloating as it closed in. Still hanging upside down from the ceiling, it pushed its head slowly forward until its eyes were only inches away from Grigori's own.

He didn't want to meet the thing's gaze. He wanted to close his eyes and hide them in his hands.

To tear them out if need be.

The vampire opened its maw, revealing shards of glistening teeth, and it lolled the arrow point of its slimy tongue out towards Grigori. It switched spasmodically back and forth, rippling as it savored the aura of terror that had wrapped Grigori in its iron embrace.

The tavern keeper felt the acid rush of his gorge rising as the stench of the thing's breath hit him. As sweet and ripe as rotten fish, it hung greasily on the air: the smell of ancient corruption.

With a distant, unrecognized clink, Grigori's knife fell from his nerveless fingers.

In the back of its throat, the vampire made a gargling noise that could almost have been a laugh. Then it drew back a little, rolled its head to one side, and struck.

Grigori's mind remained frozen, mesmerized, a hare in the snake's spell.

His hand didn't.

Even as the vampire's head whipped forward, eyes blinking shut as its tangle of fangs snapped towards the old man's neck, some deep, forgotten instinct sent Grigori ducking backwards, and thrust out with the torch.

So it was that instead of tasting the warm rush of pulsing blood, the vampire tasted fire: clean, bright fire.

It screamed as it fell, but even through its pain it managed to turn, twisting to land on all fours. The slap of its feet punctuated its cry of pain, its sudden leap ended it. One great taloned hand swiped the torch out of its prey's hand and, as the flame crashed against a far wall, Grigori saw it leap.

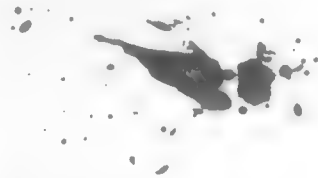
Darkness, as pure as blindness, rushed in on him.

But before it did the dying flames granted him one last sight. It was of the vampire hunters' return.

They came together, their separate attacks timed with the perfect harmony of a boxer's fists. Viento was the first to emerge from the gloom, appearing like an apparition from the darkness behind Grigori's tormentor. He raced along the roof of the passageway, his fingers obviously as skilled in finding purchase as the strigoi's. Inverted above the trailing volume of his cloak the pale moon of his face shone, its fine features contorted into a mask of unholy joy.

Calixte came from behind the tavern keeper. His porcelain cold fingers pushed down on Grigori's head as he vaulted over him, a rush of displaced air marking his passage. The confusion of his attack – a blur of speed and savagery – was burnt onto the tavern keeper's retinas as his torch died.

Cowering in the darkness, he listened to the sound of the battle, and prayed.



IT LASTED FOR no more than seconds, yet in that time Grigori felt years pass. The screams that echoed from mouths to walls to the inside of his head had a madness in them that made no distinction between joy and pain, terror and lust. Tearing flesh, splintering bone, the splatter and sliver of dismemberment rang out in hellish counterpoint to the unmistakable high pitched squeal of Viento's giggle, his laughter interrupted only by sudden grunts of exertion.

Calixte remained silent.



The worse was the warm, wet rain that began to fall, sticky to the touch and iron to the tongue.

It was too much.

Grigori collapsed helplessly on the cold floor, wracked with spasms of nausea. For a while he remained lost in the world of fear and disgust. Then, slowly, he became aware that the sounds of battle had gone. Once more, silence reigned, broken by neither breath nor movement.

For all of that, though, Grigori was passed falling into any illusion that he might be alone. Bent double he groped forward in the darkness, fingers slipping across newly dampened stones as he searched for his torch.

Still trying not to think about what its rekindled light might reveal, he took out flint and steel and scraped a shower of sparks onto the pitch. The torch took the flame, sputtering out an uneven light. With an effort of will the tavern keeper forced himself to look up.

The vampire hunters stood on either side of their foe's ruined body, bookend statues of tranquility. Neither of them seemed harmed, or even shaken. Blood drooled in thick black slicks from their perfectly carved lips and glistened on their delicate hands, but Grigori didn't think that it was theirs.

'A good fight,' Calixte said with the sigh of a man who has just enjoyed a fine meal. He turned to Grigori and bared his pink stained teeth in a smile.

The tavern keeper tried to return the gesture, pulling his lips back even as he realized that Calixte's eyes now gleamed with the same blood red he had seen in the vampire's.

The other vampire's.

'No...' Grigori said, slumping back into the cold embrace of the wall.

'Now, now,' Calixte said, his smile growing wider as he winked at Viento. 'No need to worry. The deal remains the same. All you owe us is a season's food and board. I'm sure that we won't eat you all out of house and home.'

Calixte glanced at Viento, but his companion was beyond appreciation of any wit. He had the dazed, happy look of a satiated drunkard.

A sudden fear seized Grigori, sharper than any other in this nightmare his life had become.

'Petrokov...' he began, 'my son?'

'Don't worry about him,' Calixte advised, looming up as he approached the tavern keeper. 'You have more pressing concerns.'

One wet, darkly stained hand dropped upon the old man's shoulder. Squeezing as tightly as a vulture's claw, it bruised flesh and ground bones together. Slowly, without any sign of effort, Calixte lifted his host clean off the floor and held him there, the better to gaze into his eyes.

'Now you will take us home,' the vampire told him with all the confidence of a man who has seen the future. And perhaps he had. Perhaps the twice-stolen blood that squirmed and flowed beneath the transparent lenses of his eyeballs granted him that power.

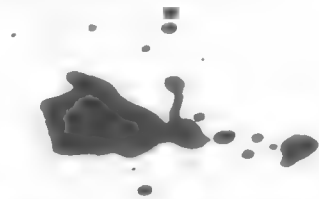
'But, my son...'

'Gone. Now, let us go.'

As gently as a cat with her kitten, he lowered Grigori back to the floor. The old man slumped, his jaw dropping foolishly. Suddenly he looked a lot more than his sixty years.

'Lead on,' Calixte said, with a theatrical bow. 'I'm hungry!'

One step followed the next as Grigori, with the aimless shambling of a broken man, led them back out of the labyrinth and into the world beyond.



THEY EMERGED into the icy blast of an enraged wind. It snapped and whipped around them, sending great sheets of blinding snow swooping across the entrance to the cave. Even the two vampire hunters hesitated before venturing out to brave its full fury. Only Grigori seemed unconcerned. He barely broke his step as he trudged out into its embrace, not even stopping for his snowshoes.

'This way,' he said, his voice as flat as ice and as weak as broken straw.

Calixte savoured his guide's despair as he led them out into the storm. He studied the stoop of the old man's shoulders as, stumbling like an octogenarian, he trudged back into the relative shelter of the forest. The vampire was content to let him pick his way hesitantly forward along trails blanketed with thick falls of driven snow, his hood forgotten, his head low.

Calixte smiled, and in that moment decided to let the tavern keeper live. He could be a sort of breathing trophy. Sometimes the subtle pleasures were the best. After all, any animal could destroy a body. It took a master to break a soul.

Here and there, sheltered by overhanging boughs or cleared by strange eddies of the blizzard's energy, dark patches of frost rimed earth glistened black and silver in the gloom. For the most part, though, the ground was a rippling ocean of grey snow, stretching out endlessly in every direction.

'This way,' Grigori repeated, the wind leaping up to snatch the words from his mouth.

The three dark figures tracked through a deep, stone-walled crevasse, the ribbon of water that had cut it hidden beneath deep drifts. Then they began to climb, one crest following the next in a confused jumble of hillocks.

'Grigori!' Calixte called, his voice almost inaudible beneath the gathering storm. 'I don't recognize this place. Are we lost?'

'I'm hungry,' Viento complained, his gaze fastening on the thin strip of flesh visible between Grigori's beard and cloak. Calixte scowled at him.

'Lost?' Grigori repeated apathetically. 'No, this is a short cut. Do you want to go back and start again?'

'No, no,' Calixte grumbled, watching his companion warily. It wouldn't do to kill their guide, especially whilst they still had use for him. 'Just be quicker.'

'Yes,' the tavern keeper mumbled, 'quicker.'

So they marched on. Grigori pushed himself until his clothes became as damp from sweat as from melted snow, so that they clung to his skin in a constant freezing embrace. Soon his legs began to burn with the agony of wading through drifts and over ridges. The pain was unbearable. He bore it anyway.

Night, as tight as a strangler's fingers, closed in around them.

'Are we almost there?' Calixte asked, his tone as light and pleasant as a man enjoying a summer's stroll. He seemed not to feel the frost that covered his forehead, nor the tiny icicle daggers that hung from his frozen hair.

'Not long now,' Grigori assured him, calling back over his shoulder as he led them upwards. He stopped.

Suddenly, with the violence of an axe stroke, the forest ended at a straight-edged cliff. Grigori looked over the edge and, even in this dim light, could make out the forest far, far below. The black-spired pines that clung to the foot of the cliff looked as small and thin as the hairs on his arm.

'How can you see in this light?'

'I can see enough.'

'Liar.'

'No, it's just over-'

Calixte's grasp cut off the old man's word. He had somehow blinked into existence directly in front of Grigori, his silhouette as black as a hole cut out of the snow choked sky beyond. Pressing frozen palms against Grigori's cheeks he held his head and stooped to examine him, rolling the old man's skull back and forth like a strigani with a crystal ball as he peered into its depths.

'Look at me,' he commanded, peering into Grigori's eyes. Calixte grunted. There was something there, hiding behind broken veins and despair. Something...

With a piercing scream he recoiled, flinging the old man to one side as if he were no more than a straw doll. Staggering backwards, his mouth and eyes wide with shock, Calixte's fingers fluttered down to rest, pale as moths, upon the knife hilt which now sprouted from his stomach.

'Liar!' he hissed, plucking the knife from his midriff with a wet, sucking sound. He glanced down at the blade and pursed his lips.

'What's going on?' asked Viento, warily advancing through a curtain of quickening snow. For a moment his master ignored him, turning his attention instead to the vanishing track of their fading footprints. The blizzard, he realized, had been filling them almost as quickly as they had been made.

'Our guide has been trying to get us lost,' he said, absentmindedly brushing the torn cloth of his waistcoat back down.

'You should have tested his obedience before following him out here!' Viento whined. 'I'm hungry!'

'Oh, don't worry. This old fool will lead us back. Won't you?' Calixte's grin was invisible in the darkness. Grigori, ignoring the bright flare of pain in his broken shoulder, dragged himself to his feet. A blast of wind crested the edge of the precipice behind him, ruffling his hair.

'Yes, you'll lead us. Take my word for it, you will. I am something of an expert in these things. What will it be, old man? Pain? Terror? The blood kiss? Somehow I don't think it will be good.'

Grigori took a step backwards. Then another. With the rattle of falling earth the ground beneath his foot began to slip.

He stopped.

'No escape that way,' Calixte gloated, enjoying himself.

'Let's kill him!' Viento suggested, starting forward.

'Not yet.'

'Why not?' Grigori asked in a voice as warm as honey. There was nothing left in it of fear, or of pain. And if there was a despair, well then, it was despair that had collapsed under its own weight into something else, something infinitely more dangerous. 'Why not kill me? Or are you too much the coward?'

For the first time in a century Calixte Lesec found himself at a loss for words.

'No...' the old man continued, with a sneer, 'no courage.'

Viento hissed.

'Ah,' Grigori mused, 'so your monkey has something to say after all.'

'Monkey?'

'Yes, that grovelling thing which follows you.'

The blizzard chuckled appreciatively.

'That's hardly pol... No! Wait!'

Calixte snatched at his companion, but it was too late.

As swiftly as a serpent, as silently as an owl, Viento struck. The impact shattered Grigori's bones like frost-rimed boughs, the snapping of them loud even above the growing

cacophony of the storm. And yet, even as the splintered bone bit into his lungs, the old man was screaming out a cry of terrible victory.

'Wait!' Calixte howled at his unheeding companion. He lunged forward, the white claws of his frozen hands crunching as they tore at the ice hard folds of Viento's cloak. With a savage tug the vampire hunter felt himself pulled forward into a sudden slush of blinding snow.

It covered his face, thick and unmelting upon the cold orbs of his eyeballs.

'Viento, stop,' he hissed, blinking furiously.

But Viento was deaf to everything now, the world outside eclipsed by a hunger so intense that it verged on insanity. With a sigh he bit down into Grigori's exposed jugular, battenning on to his victim like a leech as the hot blood began to spurt.

Calixte, his foothold crumbling away to nothing beneath Viento's steady advance, tried to release his grip on his companion, tried to push him away.

Tried and failed.

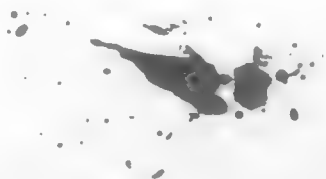
He stared disbelievingly at his hands, his fingers lost in the crackling depths of his companion's cloak. Somehow, beneath the silver gloves of ice that had enveloped his fingers, his fists seemed to have fused into a dead iron grip.

'Viento!' he screamed, ignoring the snap of his own finger bones as he pulled backwards.

But Viento was feeding. With a last, gurgling snarl he hoisted his stricken companion close, oblivious to their peril even as the world began to turn around him.

The ruins of Grigori's vocal chords hissed as he tried to curse and added his own small weight to Viento's manœuvre. With the last of his energy he wrapped his arms around his tormentor and, locked together in an embrace tighter than any lovers, he pulled the three of them backwards and down, down into the void beyond.

Of the three falling figures only Calixte screamed.



**F**OR A TIME there was nothing left in the world but the roar of the quickening blizzard, and the agonized groans of the forest upon which it vented its fury. The darkness was complete now, the falling snow thicker than pyre smoke as it choked the air between the huddled trees.

And yet, eventually, something crawled back into this terrible world. Something huddled and dark, its form hunched as, hand by trembling hand, it dragged itself up and over the lip of the crevasse.

The wind whined jealously and tried to push the emerging figure back into the abyss from whence it had come. It tore at his clothes, plucked at his hair, pushed against his chest.

Its efforts were all in vain. Slowly, weakened by a dozen terrible injuries and anemic from blood loss, Grigori fought the wind and scrambled to his feet.

He staggered towards the forest, fumbling for his fire tin as he did so. Through the numbness he felt the lump of it, safe in a pocket, and grunted. The expression ignited a flare of red, jagged pain in his throat.

The Kislevite ignored it, just as he ignored the numbness and the small, insistent voice that begged him to lay down in the comforting embrace of the snow and sleep.

He wasn't dead, and he wasn't going to give up.

Not now.

Not ever.

As if to mock him, his left leg chose that moment to give out, sending him sprawling into the snow. The soft, warm snow. How nice it would be to rest here for a while, to sleep safely in the knowledge that when he next opened his eyes it would be to see his wife and son.

Grigori swore, welcoming the pain that the curse brought. It helped him to bully himself back up to his feet and to renew his struggle onwards. The snowstorm followed him close, burying the bloody trail he left as swiftly as a guilty secret.

No. He would never give up. He'd hole up until the storm passed, build a fire and pull together a shelter. When the numbness abated there would be pain, he knew, terrible pain. So be it. He'd endure, as he always had, and find his way back to the village. His way back to Piotre and...

He stopped suddenly, eyes widening in horror. One hand fluttered up to his throat. It flitted over the torn flesh at his throat and stroked the two jagged holes that burned beneath the crusting of snow that clung to his beard.

Beneath the frozen tips of his fingers Grigori felt blood weeping from the torn flesh, the drops sliding sluggishly down into his collar: blood from the vampire's bite! Gradually, even as he probed the wound, the trickle of blood ceased.

Another man might have been relieved. Grigori wasn't such a fool. With a wound this deep the blood didn't stop until the pulse did.

It occurred to the tavern keeper that there was now nothing that could stop him from returning to his village. There was nothing that could stop him from returning to his friends, and their wives and children. Nothing that could stop him from returning to their open arms and unsuspecting hearts.

Had he still been breathing the old man might have sighed. As it was he just turned his face back into the onslaught of the blizzard and stumbled back towards the crevasse.

A burst of driving snow scoured his face as he reached the edge and stood for a moment, peering into the void beyond. Sudden drafts snatched dangerously at his heels, and driving snowflakes brushed into the dead chill of his mouth. They collected there to lay, still and unmelting, upon the icy blade of his tongue.

As the angry shroud of the blizzard wrapped itself around him, Grigori closed his eyes and thought back to a summer long ago when, bathed in the green light of a forest glade, he had taught Petrokov how to dive into a pool.

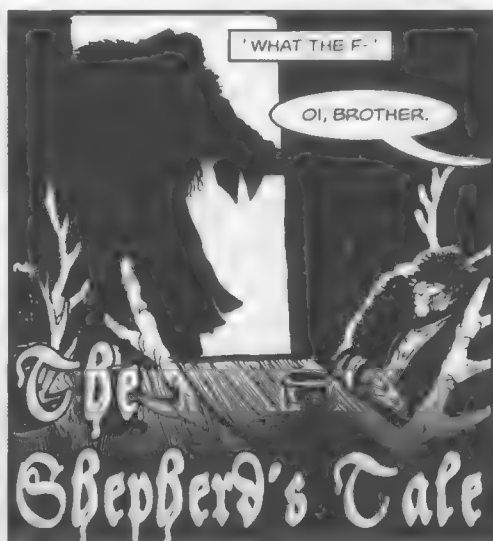
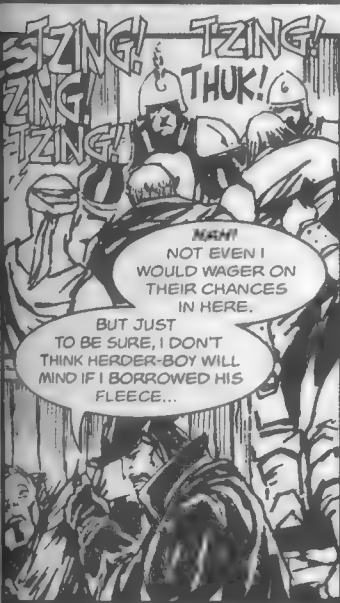
'It's easy,' he mouthed silently through frost-blackened lips. 'You just stand up straight, throw forward your arms... and dive!'

He hurtled downward, his body slicing through the wild eddies of the blizzard as he fell. And as he plunged towards the jagged rocks that waited below Grigori was smiling, for he heard not the storm's triumphant howl, but the ring of his son's delighted laughter. ❧

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR RACONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

# TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT





'NOT MY *PREFERRED* SORT OF COMPANY FOR THE EVENING BUT IT WAS SAFER IN HERE THAN IT WAS OUT THERE.'

'AND SO I ENDURED THEIR TOASTS...'

TAAL!

TAAL!

TAAL!

TAAL!

TAAL!

THE RITUAL IMBIBING...

WE  
DOWN THIS ALE  
TO THANK THEE,  
TAAL-

ANY  
CHANCE OF JUST  
A WA-

AND THEIR *UNIQUE* FORM OF WORSHIP.

MORE  
BEER!

AND SO  
HE SAID TO THE MAGISTRATE  
'BUT, MY LORD, THE COW  
BACKED ON TO  
ME!'

SO WHAT'S  
YOUR LINE OF WORK,  
BROTHER?

'IT WAS PLAIN  
SAILING UNTIL...'

ME?

'I...ER...I'M A SHEPHERD.'

'I TAKE CARE  
OF MY SHEEP'

'...AND THEIR FINE WOOL  
PROVIDES FOR ME.'



'ONE FATEFUL DAY WHICH WAS MUCH LIKE ANY OTHER, I WENT ABOUT MY SHEARING.

'UNAWARE THAT I HAD CAUGHT THE ATTENTION OF A YOUNG LAD, WHOSE INTEREST HAD BEEN CAUGHT BY MY LABOURS.



THAT EVENING HE PRESENTED HIMSELF TO ME, FANCYING HIMSELF AS MY APPRENTICE.

AND FOR ALL MY WARINESS, THE PROSPECT OF REAL COMPANIONSHIP MADE ME CAST MY CAUTION TO THE WINDS.



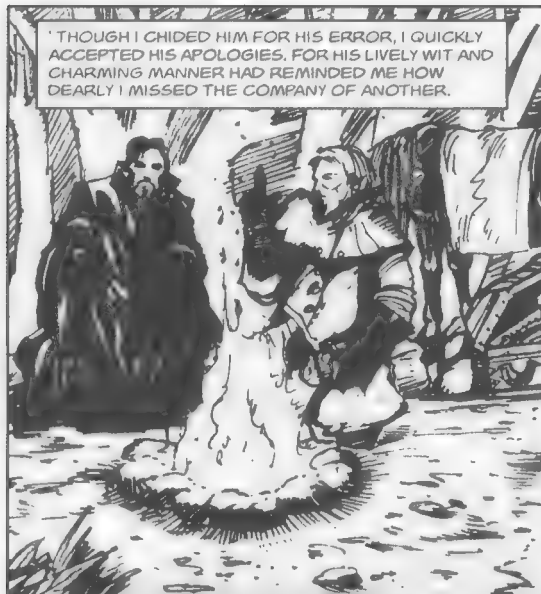
'I MUST ADMIT I DOTTED UPON HIM, AND I WAS EAGER AS HE FOR HIM TO JOIN ME IN TENDING THE FLOCK.



'FOR ALL HIS ENTHUSIASM, THE LAD HAD MUCH TO LEARN ABOUT THE BEST WAY TO SHEAR. HIS FIRST EFFORTS WERE CLUMSY, ALMOST BRUTAL.



'ONE OLD EWE WAS PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT AND DID NOT SURVIVE HIS ATTENTIONS.'





'HOW WAS I TO KNOW THAT OUR PURSUERS WERE THE MEN OF THE BOY'S FATHER...



'...A POWERFUL NOBLEMAN WHO COULD HEAR NO WORD AGAINST HIS REBELLIOUS SON.



IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE A MAN LIKE VON SCHWANZ COULD HAVE BRED SUCH A MONSTER FOR A SON.

PAH! THAT MAN WOULD MAKE A COAT OUT OF ME AS READILY AS I WOULD OF MY FLOCK!

WAIT A MINUTE. HOW DID YOU KNOW HIS NAME WAS VON SCHWANZ?



ERK...



'A POWERFUL NOBLEMAN WHO COULD MAKE MY LIFE VERY DIFFICULT INDEED.

'THAT IS WHY I CAME TO THE CITY TODAY, IN THE HOPES OF ESCAPING HIS GRASP.

'A VAIN HOPE, AS I QUICKLY DISCOVERED.'



WHY, MY LITTLE 'SPECTRE', A COAT. WHAT A MARVELLOUS IDEA.

'SHOPKEEPERS, TRADESMEN AND COUNTRY GENTRY IN TOWN ON BUSINESS...'

OH NO!

END



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# Calculus Logi

by Darius Hinks

**H**EAT RISES FROM the sands like a living thing. It shimmers and rolls over the dunes with a silent menace, bringing tears to my eyes. I blink, and an array of filmy geometric shapes shifts slowly across my retina, the minute mathematical symbols blurring in the salty water. Then I close my eyes for a moment to rest them from the harsh light.

Not that there's much to look at anyway.

Belisarius IV is barren beyond anything I have ever experienced. Not a single river breaks the monotony of the view; not so much as a sapling lifts its leaves above the sweeping dunes. If it weren't for the distant wreck of the *Sardanapalus*, it would seem a lifeless wasteland; but I know otherwise.

In three-and-a-half seconds the planet's fierce sun will reach its zenith. The heat will become sixty degrees celsius: a heat so great that the planet's scarce fauna will be forced to burrow and hide to escape the seething furnace. For a short while peace will descend, and only then can our daily race begin.

As my chronograph reaches the end of its countdown, I flex the pistons in my augmented legs, tensing the muscles and stretching the artificial fibres in preparation. 'Envisage a circle of which the centre is nowhere, and the circumference is everywhere,' I murmur, taking comfort from the old catechism as I lower myself into a crouch, 'for that is the Emperor.'

The ticking of my device is audible in the otherwise silent cave, and I sense the anticipation of the others as they ready themselves. Their fear is almost palpable,

and I can't help but smile as I consider their pitifully unadorned limbs. Every day they make the attempt, and every day another one dies.

A bead of sweat rolls slowly down the bridge of my nose, and I feel the immense heat beginning to rise through the soles of my boots.

'Now!' I cry, and launch myself into the light.

One by one we spring from the darkness of the cave, blinking like new-borns as our eyes struggle to adjust to the harsh glare. I race ahead: sprinting lightly over the dunes with the sun sparkling along my dials and cogs, and the pistons in my legs wheezing musically as they power me across the desert.

Behind me trail the other survivors, those faithless flotsam and jetsam who are now my only companions: Amaryllis, Hasan, Rabanus and Valens. Humans of course, but as alien to me as everything else on Belisarius.

I can hear their pained gasps as they struggle to breathe the stifling air and without even turning to look, I can envisage the desperation on their sweating faces as they attempt to find purchase on the shifting sand. The sun will be at its hottest for only seven minutes and forty-two seconds, and they each know that a moment's hesitation could be fatal. Seven forty-two: the numbers are embedded in their thoughts like a prayer.

I sprint like never before, as though I have daemons bearing down on me. The desert becomes an incandescent blur, and

the sound of my heart fills my ears. Speed is everything, speed and faith, and as a pleasing pain begins to tighten around my muscles, I wonder absently who will survive the day.

Soon, our goal is in sight: a small fraction of the ruined colossus that was once the *Sardanapalus*. It straddles the horizon like the carcass of a slaughtered beast, slowly collapsing in on itself under the heat of the midday sun. During the crash, this tiny section, containing the detention cells, split from the rest of the ship and landed close to the rocky outcrop we now call home.

I am the first to arrive at the wreckage, ducking under a blackened support strut and staggering into the relative cool of the shade. Then, four point eight seconds later, the convicts arrive – groaning with relief as they escape from the smouldering sun.

There is a frantic clattering and banging as we begin to scour the debris-strewn rooms.

‘Here, servitor,’ gasps Valens. ‘Quick!’

*Servitor*. He knows what I really am, and the word grates on me, but I feign indifference and hurry to his side nonetheless.

A cracked pipe is spitting dark viscous liquid onto the sand. ‘Is it safe?’ he asks, clutching my arm, his tattooed face full of hope.

I stoop down beside the pipe, take a small piece of faded vellum from within my dusty robes and hold it briefly under the trickle of liquid. ‘As a rock I shall be, with Him by my side,’ I whisper, and press the damp parchment gently to my cracked lips.

For a few seconds I remain silent, my eyes closed as I relish the sensation of the moisture soaking into my dusty mouth.

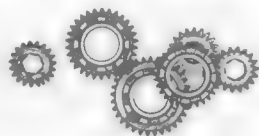
‘Well?’ hisses Valens eventually, a note of desperation creeping into his voice.

I open my eyes and calmly meet his fierce gaze. ‘Its composition is only seven parts water,’ I tell him with a shrug. ‘There are three quite noisome contaminants present.’

Valens massages his shaven head, trembling with barely-restrained anger. With a rush of adrenaline I realise that he might strike me. He leans forward until his

blistered sweating face is almost touching mine. ‘But is it safe?’

‘Oh, yes,’ I reply with a polite smile, and take a deep gulp.



THE RETURN journey is always more difficult. Every second wasted during the search for water now hangs heavily around our necks – almost as heavily as the ten litre flasks tied to our heaving chests. My footing remains true, however, and soon the rocks are in sight, along with the safety of the cave.

‘Thirty point three eight seconds!’ I call over my shoulder, holding up the chronograph. I am ahead of the others by eighteen metres and will soon reach safety. Neither heat nor fear has any hold over me: while the convicts run hunched and clumsy with weakness, I spring smoothly over the sand with my head held high, remaining utterly calm even as the hairs on my face begin to shrivel and burn.

One by one we reach the cave, tumbling desperately down the final dune and flinging ourselves onto the hard rock. I am of course the first, closely followed by Amaryllis – all one and a half metres of her small, wiry form collapsing to the ground with a staccato laugh of relief. Then comes Valens, his eyes rolling wildly as he runs past me into the shadows, and a few seconds later Hasan, his massive silhouette briefly blocking out the light as he careers through the cave’s narrow entrance, and then... and then no one.

‘Where is Rabanus?’ Hasan’s deep voice echoes ominously around the cave. Amaryllis looks up from where she lies, her face suddenly taught with fear. ‘How... how long, logi?’ she gasps, struggling for breath. I take the chronograph from within my robes, and examine its delicate glyphs. I prolong the moment for two point seven seconds, aware that in the device’s radium glow my face must look strange and menacing, then I shake my head nonchalantly.

'Time's up.'

They rush to the mouth of the cave and squint out into the blinding light. At first there is nothing to be seen, but then Rabanus appears, sprinting wildly towards us. Even at this distance I can see the animal terror on his face, the pitiful lack of self-control. Somehow he must have fallen behind, and he is still two minutes and three seconds from the safety of the rocks.

'Look there,' says Amaryllis, pointing a trembling finger at the sand near the cave's entrance, but her words are unnecessary – we can all see the dunes beginning to roll and shift.

With inexplicable relish I realise Rabanus is already dead, and all we can do now is watch.

Amaryllis leans heavily against Hasan. 'Oh, Rabanus,' she groans. 'Poor Rabanus.'

The dunes begin to churn and boil more violently, and from beneath the ground comes a horrendous noise: a tearing, rumbling grinding that fills each of their faces with dread. Hasan turns away, unable to watch, knowing all too well what will happen next.

Then the movement ceases.

We strain forward to watch. Rabanus is now only thirty-two seconds from the cave, and in the deathly quiet I can hear the hoarse barking of his breath as he races towards us.

'Maybe some days the heat lasts longer,' Valens wonders aloud, turning to me, his voice suddenly full of hope. 'Maybe he can still make it?'

Receiving no reply, he looks once more out at the desert to see that Rabanus is now twenty seconds away – his legs pounding the sand like pistons and a relieved grin beginning to spread across his sunburnt face. 'He is going to make it!' cries Valens eagerly.

The desert explodes.

A blinding eruption of sand and air throws me to the ground, and in the din and confusion someone screams horribly. When the air clears, only Hasan is still standing, but from the floor of the cave we all see the same terrible, surreal scene that he does.

Rabanus is hanging twenty-two metres up in the air, his eyes wide with incomprehension as he looks down at us from his strange perch. He's obviously dazed with shock, and his head thrashes violently from side to side as he tries to grasp the terrible reality of what's happening to him.

Then I notice his legs, lying on the desert floor, far below, spraying a powerful torrent of blood across the sun-bleached sand. Rabanus gives a hoarse cry of denial, and strains to free himself, but the blood loss overcomes him and he collapses into a lifeless slump.

The creature holding him in one of its monstrous claws raises him higher, seeming to savour the moment, then it rams the man's ruined torso greedily into one of its many gaping mouths and crashes heavily back down onto the sand. The impact sends out such a huge seismic tremor that fifteen pieces of the cave's roof fall down around me.

The behemoth has returned.



'THE WHO JUDGES me is the Emperor,' I whisper, as I sit alone in the moonlight, 'I shall not judge myself.' The words bring me little comfort however. Emotions do not sit easily with a calculus logi, and the guilt that has recently settled over me stings like an open wound. I nervously finger the nest of wires that snake from under my scalp – twisting and plaiting them as though they are strands of hair. Logarithms and ciphers, interpolation and statistics – these are the emotions of a calculus logi. The dogma of logic and obedience. Certainty is all, certainty and blind faith. So this terrible seed of self-doubt gives me a sense of foreboding I cannot seem to quell.

The sources of my confusion are asleep at my feet, huddled together for warmth and snoring contentedly. As I look down at them, my certainty returns. Of course, I know where my duty lies, and I must be strong. I must protect these criminals,



however unworthy they might seem. If the Emperor wishes me to die here, on this barren world then so be it, I will die with pride. Although – my thoughts cloud over once more – would the Emperor really wish to lose one faithful servant in the name of three faithless ones? I shake my head in confusion and look out into the desert to distract myself from such shameful thoughts.

Even in the inky blackness, I can see the monstrous shape of the creature: ever patient, ever hungry, waiting silently on the horizon. Its huge eyes are blind and sealed, but I know that it senses my every move, every subtle odour of my flesh. Should I be foolish enough to step out from the safety of the cave, even for a second, it would pounce. Tearing me limb from limb, as it did those poor souls who never made it to the safety of the cave.

Still, it will not have long to wait. Days, weeks at most before it will have us all. Dehydration, hunger and the constant heat will finally take their toll, and even I will be too slow to survive the daily scavenging runs back to the detention cells. Unless...

I turn to look once more at my companions and notice with a guilty start that Amaryllis has awoken, and is watching me intently. 'You should rest,' I say, with what I hope is a reassuring smile.

She says nothing in reply, but continues to stare up at me from the shadows. The whites of her eyes are just visible in the moonlight, and I have the uncomfortable feeling that she has somehow read my thoughts. 'And what about you, logi? Do you ever sleep? Or did the tech-priests take even that pleasure away from you?'

I frown, despite myself. 'Do you find sleep pleasurable? How can oblivion be a pleasure?'

Amaryllis laughs softly to herself. 'Oh, you'd be surprised at the things I find pleasurable.' She crawls over to sit next to me and arches her eyebrows enigmatically. 'I'm not the nice girl you might think I am.'

My tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth, so I simply smile awkwardly and nod. Amaryllis fills me with a nameless fear that I cannot explain. The others scare me too, but for reasons I can at least identify: Valens is clearly insane – a novice Helio Cultist whose sun-worship has frazzled his brain to such an extent that the Ecclesiarchy were forced to lock him up. For all his fierce facial tattoos and piercings he is too much a prisoner of his own mind to be a threat. And Hasan is simply a thug. Although he claims to have once been an Imperial crewman, I somehow doubt it. His brutal slab-like face and colossal frame mark him for what he really is: a belligerent simpleton. But Amaryllis... she is altogether more mysterious. Her faithlessness seems somehow wanton.

Annoyed by the strange power she seems to have over me I attempt to embarrass her. 'I hope you don't mind me asking, but I was wondering—'

'This sounds interesting,' she says with a smirk.

I hesitate, and clear my throat self consciously. 'Well, you may not wish to talk about it... of course...' I wait for her to interrupt again, but she just continues to smile coyly at me. 'Well, it's just... at the time of the crash you must have been in the vicinity of the detention cells... in fact you must have been in one of the detention cells, and I just wondered – please don't think me impertinent – but what crime had you committed?'

She looks blankly at me and says nothing in reply. Her face assumes an expressionless mask that seems, in the half-light, horribly sinister and I have the disturbing feeling I am sitting with an automaton. I suddenly regret my question, and begin to shuffle awkwardly on the cold floor. Then, after a painfully long time, she finally moves. She takes a slender piece of rock from within her coat and begins to drag it along the cave floor – so that its edge sparks slightly in the dark, and an unpleasant scraping sound cuts through the silence.

I cough nervously again. I have noticed her toying with the stone on two previous occasions – it's one of the many things I

find inexplicably disturbing about her. As she continues to hone the edge of the rock, I feel suddenly afraid, and look out once more at the behemoth.

She follows my gaze, but only after twelve seconds of awkward silence does she finally speak. 'Strange, isn't it? We can't escape – we may as well have died with all the others during the crash – and yet every day we put so much effort into postponing the inevitable. Silly really. It would be easier just to end it all now.' She flicks a pebble out onto the sand, and watches as the creature shifts its monstrous head in our direction. 'It could all be over so quickly.'

'Don't say such things,' I reply. 'Your substance is not your own, to be cast aside like an empty shell, it is a vessel for the Emperor's grace.' I tap my chest to reinforce the point, and quote from memory: 'The greatest and most precious form He has given us, that we may partake in His divine light!'

Infuriatingly, Amaryllis simply rolls her eyes. 'Oh, yes – the Emperor... how could I forget him?' She shakes her head, and I feel my muscles tensing with anger.

'You should not speak lightly of such things.'

'Calm down, logi, suicide isn't really my style.' Then she smiles coyly. 'Besides, death may not be the only option.'

I narrow my eyes, but say nothing.

'You know what I mean, friend, you've seen it too.'

I shake my head vigorously. Maybe she has read my thoughts. 'It could not be done,' I say, all too aware of what she is referring to. Further out in the desert, beyond the remains of the detention cells, lies the main wreckage of the *Sardanapalus*. If anyone could reach it, within the allotted time, they would surely find refuge within its huge labyrinthine shell.

Amaryllis leans forward, her small elfin face full of excitement. 'It could be done,' she says, with the moonlight flashing in her eyes. 'We could make it, you and me. We're still fast enough, not like the others, and we wouldn't need to allow time for a return journey – we'd be safe within the

ship. The creature could never break through the hull.' She gently touches my hand, and I withdraw it with a start. 'There would be enough water to last for months, and food! Think,' – she pauses to catch her breath – 'the ship must have a signalling device of some kind, some kind of distress beacon. It needn't just be our mausoleum, we could be rescued. Think, logi!'

I shake my head again. These are the very thoughts that have been haunting me. With my implants, and the coolants running through my veins, I have no doubt that I could make it, but it would be I alone who reached the ship: none of the others would survive the attempt, I'm sure of that. If I were to try and reach the main part of the ship it would mean deserting Amaryllis and the others to their fate. Seven forty-two: the numbers are their death sentence, but somehow she refuses to see it. As I watch her, fidgeting with excitement, I feel a sudden rush of pity, and my mind is finally made up: I can't leave these people to die. I must remain until the end, keep them alive as long as possible, and if necessary, perish with them. The decision gives me a warm glow of righteousness.

'No,' I say, raising my chin proudly, 'there is not enough time.' I gesture to the numerous ciphers and clockwork devices that litter my battered copper outfit. 'I have examined every possibility, every differential, every possible equation, and we would not have enough time to reach the *Sardanapalus* before the sun began to cool.'

I feel sure that my authoritative tone will finally silence the girl, but she simply smiles enigmatically and toys with the sharpened stone. Then, without taking her eyes off me she begins spinning it on the ground. 'Can you only think like an adding machine, Regulus? Can you only see the world as arithmetic?' I say nothing, and she shakes her head, her smile becoming a grimace. 'They threw me in those stinking cells simply because I can see things as they really are. I can see the world from another point of view!' She tosses the rock into the air, and to my amazement it vanishes. An

inexplicable feeling of nausea rushes up from my stomach. Then she leans forward until I can feel her warm breath on my face. Fear grips me, and I try to back away, but the cave wall is behind me.

'You cannot account for every variable' she whispers, and rests her hand gently on my neck. I would be more comfortable with a snake at my throat than this strange woman, and as she slides her hand across my skin, I squirm uncomfortably. I feel suddenly powerless, and unable to move. She reaches under my leather skullcap and I feel her fingers shifting delicately back and forth across my skin. Then, to my dismay, she pulls something from beneath the matted cerebral wires. 'Life is more than an equation,' she says showing me the stone. 'You must learn to trust to chance.'

'Cheap tricks will not save you from that,' I say, gesturing out of the cave and trying to still the tremor in my voice. 'You're nothing but a faithless conjuror!'

'I need no cheap tricks, logi! Trust me,' she hisses, 'you cannot account for every variable, you cannot see every eventuality. If you would just—'

A rustling noise comes from behind us.

We turn to see that Valens has awoken and is watching us in silence.

Even in the dark of the cave I see the blood rush into Amaryllis's cheeks, and I wonder how much the Helio Cultist has heard.

For a few seconds he remains silent, obviously confused by his surroundings, then he sits up with a yawn. 'What are you two gossiping about,' he says, stretching his arms with an audible crack. 'Not me, I hope?'

We both laugh awkwardly.

'Well, no point trying to sleep now, I suppose,' he says, rising to his feet, 'it will soon be light, and my master will rise from his slumber.' I look out through the cave entrance, and sure enough, on the distant horizon, beyond the great mass of the beast, the black of the sky is already changing to a deep, vivid blue. 'Another hour and it will be dawn.'

'Seventy-two minutes and forty-three seconds,' I say.

Amaryllis laughs dryly, but Valens seems suddenly annoyed. He glares at me. 'What *would* we do without you logi?'

I smile innocently in reply, and Valens moves to the back of the cave, where he lies down on the ground again and begins to moan strangely.

'What is he doing?' Amaryllis whispers, arching her eyebrows.

'It could be some kind of religious rite – maybe he's praying?'

Amaryllis peers through the darkness at the man, obviously amused. She watches as he spreads his limbs into a star shape and grins inanely at the cave's ceiling while continuing to chant. 'He is,' she murmurs, 'utterly insane.'



'YOU TRIPPED me!' screams Valens, scrambling to his feet and squaring up to Hasan. 'You retarded ape!'

'I did not,' replies Hasan in his deep slow voice.

Amaryllis and I sprint past them both without pausing.

As I run, I turn to see Hasan drawing himself up to his full height of two metres, so that he towers above the priest. 'You fell.'

With an enraged scream, Valens flies at him, and the pair fall – punching and kicking – down the side of a steep dune.

I turn away again, and concentrate on running. With Amaryllis straining to match my speed of twenty-five kilometres an hour, I fly over the dunes. Each day, rather than growing weaker, I seem to be becoming faster, more powerful than before. Adrenaline has replaced blood as my vital fluid, and I wait impatiently each day for noon – and the race – to arrive.

I reach the cave with two point three minutes to spare, and trot calmly onto the safety of the rocks. Amaryllis soon follows, her face flushed with exertion, and her

limbs trembling uncontrollably. As she falls to the floor, coughing violently, I look back out across the desert. 'No,' I say, stifling a laugh, 'surely not!'

Out across the dunes, Valens and Hasan are still rolling and tumbling over the sand – laying blow after blow on each other. The sand around the convicts is now red with their blood, and they seem, with only seconds until the creature rises once more, utterly oblivious to their danger, intent only on killing each other. 'Animals,' I mutter under my breath, and shake my head.

Amaryllis rushes to my side. 'Oh, no,' she gasps, 'what have they done?'

We watch in silence as the distant figures wrestle and kick, lost in their rage. Then, with almost comic surprise, they freeze, mid-punch, and remember where they are.

'Too late,' breathes Amaryllis next to me, shaking her head with disbelief. 'They don't have enough time.' She looks at me with her mouth hanging open like a simpleton. 'Do they?'

The ground is already beginning to shift and roll, and I shake my head slowly. The men finally continue their sprint in the direction of the cave, but they have wasted far too much time, and I can see the fear on their faces. Animals, I think, is this worth dying for? They are not utterly without guile though, I notice. In an attempt to confuse the stirring behemoth they take separate paths towards the cave – presumably thinking that this way at least one of them might survive.

Valens is thirty-three seconds from the cave when the creature takes him. At first it seems as though he has fallen into an unseen pit. The ground suddenly disappears from beneath his feet and he simply vanishes from view. Then the pit rises from the ground around him and is revealed as a great gaping maw of impossible size.

'Save us,' breathes Amaryllis as the creature rises up into the sky, lifting its huge mass up from beneath the ground.

'It's incredible,' I murmur, shaking my head in awe.

'Look,' says Amaryllis in a small voice, 'Hasan.'

The usually brutal looking man seems suddenly child-like as the creature slams its massive body back into the ground and speeds in his direction. He staggers to a halt, seeing that the creature is now between him and the cave.

'What is he doing?' hisses Amaryllis, as the man drops dejectedly to the floor.

'Dying,' I reply.



'NO WE COULD make it,' says Amaryllis, pacing around the cave. 'You've got to trust me, logi. I see things you can't – you can't see every eventuality! You must see beyond the numbers. The universe revolves on an axis of luck and circumstance... not science!'

I look up at her from where I sit. It has been two days, eight hours, fifteen minutes and sixteen seconds since the deaths of Valens and Hasan, and Amaryllis's mouth has not closed once. Her exhortations are becoming more and more hysterical. 'I've told you,' I say, 'I've looked at every possible variable.'

'But you don't *know* every possible variable!' she cries, with tears of frustration appearing in her eyes. 'Are you a god, that you can foresee the outcome of all things?'

'There is only the God-Emperor.'

'Pah! And what is He? A corpse... at best!'

'He is not this or that, but He is all things, for He is the cause of all.'

Amaryllis clutches her shaven head in her hands, and howls. 'Oh, what did I do to deserve this? Marooned with a... with a sanctimonious abacus!' She sits heavily down on the floor opposite me, and begins to scrape her stone angrily across the ground.

Once again I feel alien emotions stirring within me. As the days wear on, the woman's endless bullying entreaties are fuelling a growing rage in me. Why should I, a loyal servant of the God-Emperor, end my days on this lifeless world, in this

pointless vigil – so that a faithless criminal need not die alone? In a few more days, even I will be too weak to make the longer journey – to the main wreck of the *Sardanapalus*. Is this what the Emperor would really want? How can I be sure? It can only be days now before I will no longer have any option, but to stay... and die. I vigorously shake my head as though trying to dislodge my shameful thoughts. No, I assure myself, I must not question my duty. I must be true to my training. The forge world of Zopyrus VI seems a distant memory – it has in fact been two centuries, eight months and three and a half days since I knelt before the tech-priests and memorised the sacred tracts of my order – but nevertheless, even here I must remain true to my faith. My role is to protect my fellow humans, and if I deserted this woman now, I would be no better than a heretic.

‘It cannot be done,’ I say softly.

‘Fool!’ says Amaryllis through gritted teeth. ‘You make me sick.’ She slams the stone on the ground angrily. ‘It’s drones like you who make me ashamed to be human! Not you that you are much of a human anyway!’

Anger rises unbidden in my mind, and I feel my pulse quicken unpleasantly. The woman seems to be capable of stirring utterly useless and unproductive emotions in me.

‘How much of you is actually a man? Half, if that? The tech-priests have made a freak of you, Regulus.’ She rises to her feet and levels a trembling finger at me. ‘You talk of the Emperor, but what are you to Him? Nuts and bolts! A walking box of cogs!’

‘My faith is sufficient to ensure His protection, where as you are nothing but a...’ – I hesitate before uttering such a potent word – ‘heretic!’

‘Maybe, but at least I’m a human! What are you? A servitor? A machine? How could the Emperor love that?’

I feel my pulse throbbing angrily in my forehead. Her words cut through me like knives, and my head is beginning to spin with anger. Where have these emotions come from? I have never before lost my temper – has the sun corrupted my thought patterns?

‘But worst of all,’ she shouts, ‘you are a coward!’ Then she whirls around and strides to the back of the cave, where she sits down with her back to me.

I find I am sat bolt upright, my fists clenched with anger. She is a worthless traitor. It cannot be right that I should die for such a wretch. It cannot! I could easily reach the *Sardanapalus*. What do I care that she could not? Like the final part of an equation I feel something in my mind slotting into irreversibly place. Almost without volition, I find I have made a decision.

‘Very well,’ I say, trying not to let my voice betray my emotions, ‘tomorrow we will make the attempt.’

Amaryllis turns to look at me with a shocked expression. Then she grins. ‘I knew you had it in you.’



AS I PATIENTLY watch the glyphs on my chronograph, I feel a growing sense of joy. ‘Ten seconds,’ I say, turning to Amaryllis, who is crouched beside me at the mouth of the cave. She nods, her sun-lit face full of eagerness for the race ahead. ‘We take the same route as before, pause for twenty seconds at the remains of the detention cells to catch our breath ... then just keep running until we reach the *Sardanapalus*.’

I flex the pistons in my legs, watching the hydraulic cables as they slide smoothly back and forth. Strange, that such insignificant things should make all the difference between survival – I turn to look at Amaryllis – and death.

‘Now,’ I cry, and throw myself out into the desert.

I run as before, with a loping easy stride. Dashing comfortably over the shifting sands at twenty kilometres an hour, and hurdling the dunes as though they aren’t there, I have no need to push myself. I know to the exact millisecond how long it will take me to reach the *Sardanapalus*, and even allowing for errors, seven minutes and forty-two seconds will give me plenty of time.



At the sound of Amaryllis's gasping breath, I find it difficult not to laugh. 'Machine' she called me. What a fool. The Emperor's gifts of augmentation are bestowed on only the most faithful of His servants; but that's something a worthless apostate like her couldn't hope to understand.

I look over my shoulder, and see that for the moment she is keeping up with me, although a combination of the heat and exertion have already coloured her face an unhealthy purple. She grins eagerly back at me, and once more I have to stifle a laugh. I can barely wait to see the expression on her face when she realises that I have been right all along. I hope that before the creature devours her, she will have time to consider the superiority of my 'freak' brain.

When I reach the detention cells I am barely short of breath, but I nevertheless lean against the twisted metal frame and attempt to lower my heart rate a little. Amaryllis is still four point six seconds away and I look out in the direction of the *Sardanapalus*. My heart swells as I see that large sections of the hull are still intact – it will be a perfect refuge from the creature. It is even possible that I will find other survivors, hopefully of a more pious sort than my recent companions. I check the chronograph. Twelve point eight seconds and I will need to start the next section of the run.

A hoarse gasping alerts me to the arrival of Amaryllis. She slumps next to me against the cell wall with whimper, and then crouches down on the ground as she tries to catch her breath. Sweat is rushing over her face in torrents. 'How... how are we... doing?'

I smile, relishing the moment. 'No time for a rest, I'm afraid,' I say, tapping the chronograph. 'In three minutes and thirty-two seconds it will be cool enough for the creature to rise. We need to go now.'

I bend down beside her and whisper in her ear: 'In fact, as it would take you three minutes and fifty-eight seconds to reach the wreck, you may as well start preparing yourself for the afterlife now. This will be your last trip.'

Amaryllis looks up at me in alarm, and I feel a thrill of power. I see now how right I was to lead her to her death. I am more than she could ever be – I am more than human... I am calculus logi. As the sun beats down on me, I feel the Emperor's grace flooding through me – mingled in with the blinding light.

Then, strangely, I notice that Amaryllis is smiling.

'I have other plans,' she says, and with surprising speed shoves something towards me. Before I can react, there is an explosion of escaping air and my legs give way. As I crash heavily to the ground I see that her sharpened stone is embedded deeply in my femoral hydraulics.

Amaryllis steps calmly away from me as I thrash around awkwardly on the ground, cursing and spitting. 'Do you see now, friend,' she says, dusting herself down demurely, 'that you cannot account for every variable?' She stoops so that her face is just out of my reach. 'But maybe you would have to be a little more *human* to truly understand that, Regulus.'

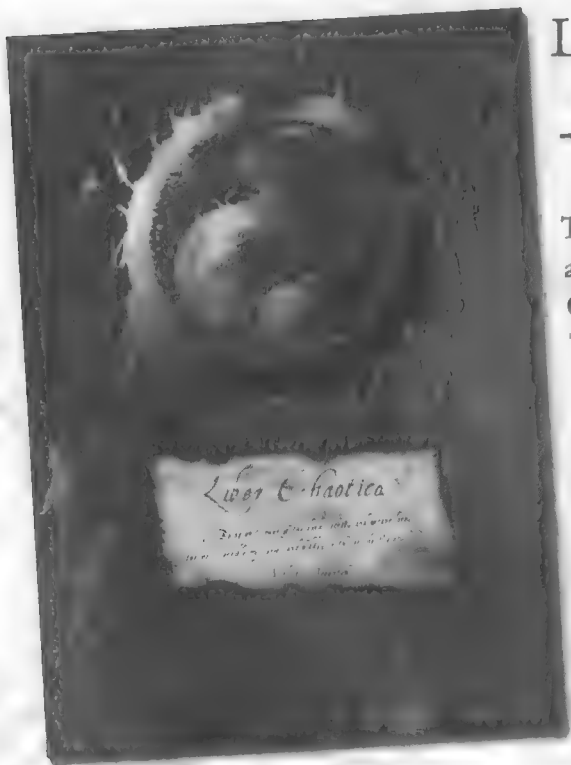
With an inarticulate roar I try to pull myself to my feet, but my shattered limbs won't hold me and one point two seconds later I hit the floor again with a crash. I land heavily on my side, and watch as Amaryllis sprints lightly away across the desert – towards the *Sardanapalus*.

My mind is blank with animal rage, and at first I fail to grasp what she has done. Then, as my thoughts clear, I realise. Of course: by the time the creature has finished with me, Amaryllis will be safe. She has bought her escape with my life. She has planned this all along. All those days spent sharpening the stone...

My wrath consumes me. I turn my head and glare furiously into the sun – letting the light burn through my eyes, as though the heat can somehow scorch away my fury. As pain blossoms from behind my retina I hear the tech-priests' mournful litany, coming back to haunt me from across the centuries: 'Deception is the corruption of science.'

'No!' I scream as the ground beneath me begins to roll and shift. 'No! No! No!' ●

# The Time of Change is Upon Us...



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*Vespertine*  
DAVID GRIFFITHS

THE SNOW lay white, crisp and even along the banks of the River Reik, and a stark shroud covered the city as far as the eye could see. Blankets of white capped the Nuln horizon, sculpting the skyline peaks into dunes that buried the spires and towers in a bleak canopy of winter.

At first, the flakes had fallen in straight lines, building a snow cover that coated everything evenly. The roof tiles and belfries witnessed little more than a flurry of snowfall that may have blown away, given time. But come twilight, the wind had begun to blow from the north-west, the snow drifting against the steeples and walls of the universities. The truly massive drifts lay against the Gunnery School's west side; some of them towered to a height of ten feet, and beyond them the streets and alleyways were scoured bare to their cobbles by the constant wind.

The great bridge that straddled the Reik had been a bystander in all this, having known many similar spells of turbulence and blizzard weather. Its cast iron girders and abutments always held firm in the face of such elements, steadfast in the darkness. It remained a mute, towering witness to acts of nature and the deeds of man alike. The great arch stood watch over the city's affairs, spanning the vast tideway below like a testament to pride and stateliness. It overlooked the panorama of foundries and work yards alongside the river, the abandoned dwellings of dwarf smithies from bygone centuries, now buried under amorphous white cocoons of snow. The bridge had long commanded a bird's eye view of the city's great industry, its floating commerce and the life blood of its trade route.

It had also been a party to much of the city's darkness.

Ludwig van Streisser stood now, his feet at the edge of the bridge as he gazed dizzily down into the black water below. The young man's clothes – a thin silk shirt and calfskin breeches – were no protection at all from the howling, shrieking wind that numbed his marrow. Flakes of snow swirled and danced across his vision as he contemplated the brink; a

sheer, unobstructed drop that fell away some fifty or sixty feet down to the depths beneath him. One hand grasped the bridge's baluster, the other hung carelessly at his side as he edged out into space.

He'd barely begun to feel the cold at all. It didn't matter that the river had whetted the edge of the wind; its clammy dampness biting at Ludwig's skin like an auger. He tensed ready for the jump, sparing a final thought for the world he would be leaving behind. He considered his life as curator of the Countess Emmanuelle von Liebewitz's gallery, the place where he'd spent so much of his time surrounded by a wealth of beauty and art, the exquisite sculptures and paintings of the masters who'd thrilled and enchanted him since boyhood. He remembered the whirl of high society amid the countess's lavish ballrooms, all so inconsequential to him now.

Looking down into the dark river, into that black and waiting void, Ludwig now sensed the terrible understanding that had seized him ever since the fateful day he'd first seen Sombera's great masterpiece. Midnight Sun, the very same artwork of black and terrible genius which had lately been exhibited in the gallery at Nuln, and which had finally opened his eyes to the true, nebulous and hopeless nature of reality, the dark and gruesomely magnified way of things.

As a result, Ludwig had suddenly begun to appreciate the tragedy of his predicament, his life. The feeling had dawned around him, a realisation that seemed to flood his mind with a strange black and unwanted daylight. It swept away the other thoughts in his brain as if they'd been no more than litter. He saw the infinite gulf of darkness that surrounded the Empire – itself no more than a tiny speck of civilisation amid a wilderness of bestiality and inhuman predators. He found he could no longer uphold his faith in Sigmar. Not since he'd come to realise the true nature of the Empire, its lack of concern for the beggars and the sick folk who lined the streets of its cities. Not since he'd come to

understand the true nature of its greed, its weakness for the filthiest, most venal form of corruption.

Since the day he'd first laid eyes on the Sombera painting, Ludwig had looked around himself and been newly aware of the world. He stood gazing out from the bridge as the snow continued to fall, becoming increasingly heavy through each dark moment. He could see inside the falling flakes of snow, just as he could see the essence of all things. What he saw was a black snow tumbling with incessant heaviness from a black sky. There was nothing recognisable in that sky – only the darkness, the eclipse of all light.

Looking over the edge, he felt giddy for a prolonged, slow and final moment. Snowflakes and tears blurred his vision, a bell tolled in the distance as he stepped off into space; he felt himself plummet and cried out.

'Sigmar, forgive me.'

His last words as he tumbled through space.

He felt his body hit the surface, dropping into the Reik's waters like a heavy stone, its dank and freezing darkness billowing up around him as he struggled in the current, his heart fit to burst in his chest. Cold water, filled his nose, his mouth and his lungs as he opened them all to a silent scream. He snorted the briny water, drinking it without wanting to. He could feel panic exploding in his chest, becoming a flare of agony. And somewhere in the darkness beyond, as his consciousness struggled to fade, it almost seemed that he was able to hear the distant sound of gleeful laughter.



'T'S A SURE sign that the Ruinous Powers are at work in our midst!' the old priest said. 'And yet still the gallery continues to display this vile abomination, this blasphemous artifact of darkness.'

The Sigmarite priest's voice was powerful, as compelling as the beat of a drum as it rose and fell, echoing around the marble chambers and hallways of the museum where he stood, staging his protest. Brother Alberich's parchment face had grooved into strong narrow lines and his upper lip curled back as he uttered his public condemnation of the city gallery's newest art exhibit.

'This foul, unnatural picture is nothing more than a symbol of evil,' the preacher continued. 'It is the work of an unholy, nefarious hand and should be destroyed! Cleansed in fire in the name of Lord Sigmar Himself!'

Falko Rummenach had stood nearby all the while, watching the scene with a sense of tired amusement as a gaggle of art lovers and museum-goers huddled around the priest. They formed a voyeuristic circle at the spot where the old preacher struggled, arms held at bay as two of Falko's city watchmen made the move to arrest him.

'We're doing this for your own good,' Falko told the priest in a distinctly bored voice. 'Just so you won't be able to cause more trouble for yourself than you already have.'

The assembly of onlookers had begun to stir a little, a ripple of laughter passing through the crowd as they enjoyed the spectacle of Brother Alberich, a highly esteemed lector priest of the city's temple-monastery, being wrestled to the floor at the behest of a militia patrol.

'You seem to forget I'm a respected and influential follower of the holy faith,' the old man cried. He let forth a little squeak in protest as his hands were roughly bound together behind his back.

'And you seem to forget breach of the peace is still a crime in this part of the Reikland,' Falko answered irritably. 'Not to mention your willful intent to cause damage to one of the countess's valuable works of art.'

Falko had already stooped down to inspect the ornate dagger, a bejewelled and ceremonial blade which had fallen to the floor during the tussle. He studied the workmanship of the handle, the pattern



of silver and studded pearls, which crowned a thin, bright and razor-edged length of steel.

'I'm sure that your priestly brethren at the monastery will be most interested to learn you've been stealing their sacred cutlery to deface the gallery's paintings,' Falko sneered. His gloved hand gave a signal to the remaining guardsmen who created a cordon, gradually dispersing the crowd until they'd formed a slow moving procession away from the scene.

A calm sense of grandeur and solitude had begun to settle once more along the gallery's wide corridors as Falko addressed the situation at hand. There was a brief moment where he was able to appreciate the surrounding maze of statuary and painted canvas that graced the walls of the ground-floor chamber, an instant when his layman's eye had enjoyed the splendor of framed portraits and murals that encompassed the hallways and corridors thereabouts.

'This man is a maniac, a fanatic, I tell you.'

Sigmund Gertholt – the gallery's young deputy curator – had been waiting at Falko's side all the while, tapping insistently on the watch captain's shoulder in a demand for immediate satisfaction. 'Don't you think it's about time somebody decided to detain this lunatic for endangering the countess's property? I tell you it's the third time in the last few days we've had to call on the city watch in order to have the old fool removed from the premises! The first time was because he'd been causing a disturbance and scaring away the gallery's clientele with his ranting about the apocalypse, and now it's because we've had to stop him attacking our brand new exhibit with that knife of his!'

The young man gestured as he spoke, pointing towards the aforementioned exhibit, which Falko had barely paused to examine amid the fuss and confusion of the moment.

Hanging on the wall behind them was a work of art that resembled nothing so much as a black blotch of paint, the child-like rendering of a dark and circular void.

Vicci Sombera's *Midnight Sun* was a dark ball of shadow that seemed to engulf the canvas it was painted on: a black, monstrous blemish amid the rich colour and opulence of the surrounding artworks.

'May Sigmar have mercy on me in my ignorance,' Falko gave the other guards a despairing, sarcastic little shrug, scratching his beard as he considered the so-called work of art. 'But I can't say I blame our holy brother here for wanting to attack the ghastly thing. Indeed, I'd say it looks as though someone's already been having a go at it with a bucket of horse dung.'

A few sniggers and chuckles arose from the other militiamen as they stood to attention, all the while supposedly defending the priceless painting from further jeopardy.

'Well I wouldn't expect a bunch of cretinous soldiers to appreciate the hallmark of true genius anyway. Not even when it's hovering under their noses.' The deputy curator cast a sardonic look around at the circle of men, pointing a finger up at the painting in question. 'Sombera's *Midnight Sun* is among the latest and most brilliant works of the Tilean modern school, in case you hadn't heard.'

'It's a work of foul malignity,' cried Brother Alberich. 'It must be cleansed in fire!'

Falko turned and regarded the gnarled, withered face of the priest and the defiant gleam that stirred behind the old man's hollow eyes as he continued his prattle. The cracked frown lines and facial scars of self-inflicted pain, by which it was possible to recognise a follower of the flagellant orders, had come as no great surprise to the watch captain.

'Every time we buy a new painting or a new piece of sculpture for the gallery, it seems we have to endure one of these righteous idiots marching around the place and telling everybody it's a work of decadence and evil,' the deputy curator complained. 'I don't mind telling you I'm sick to death of hearing about it. I won't be satisfied until he's been thrown behind

bars, or placed in the city asylum at the very least.'

Falko made a grunting sound from somewhere at the back of his throat – a noise his subordinates in the militia had learned to recognise as a sign of impatience – and held up a warning hand toward the two antagonists.

'I'll tell you this once, and once only,' he said. 'And you'd better remember that I'm the one who's supposed to be asking the questions around here, so if I have one more interruption from either of you then I'll throw you both in the cells with every drunkard and vagabond in the city. Now, please explain to me Brother Alberich, if you might be so kind: what exactly is it about this particular painting that you find so objectionable?'

Though his hands were still tied firmly behind his back, the scrawny old priest had managed to rise to his feet. The old man looked up at Falko, his face still defiant.

'This foul effusion of darkness has already claimed the lives of several of our citizens,' he said. 'Including my own revered Brother Daelius, who was bewitched by its spell. He became morbidly obsessed with it! He became disenchanted with life and drowned himself in the Reik, beguiled as he was by this daemon's plaything. And now it has even claimed the soul of your chief curator, yet you do nothing to prevent it from causing further carnage!'

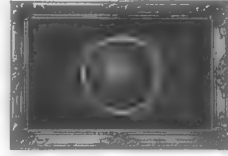
Brother Alberich turned, inhaled and spat a large wad of phlegm in the direction of the painting, missing his target and hitting the adjacent stretch of wall.

I have a mind to consult the witch hunters about all this, since I'm sure they'll share your own contempt of the modern style, Herr Rummenach,' the old priest continued. 'I tell you, this painting must be destroyed and Sombera himself must be brought to trial on charges of witchcraft.'

Falko's gaze had followed the motion of the other guards as they all turned, staring up at the Sombera picture as it hung on the wall.

Midnight Sun.

The simple and yet oddly disquieting depiction of a jet-black sphere set against a spacious and empty background.



THE SNOW, having unfurled its stark whiteness upon the city over the previous week had continued to fall in flurries that were tentative yet constant. Languid drifts and layers gave the impression of a world in a state of sleep, made all the more vivid because of the dream like silence that lay over everything. The merchant streets had become slumberous in the cold, the beggars and panhandlers having somehow disappeared from view in the process. The city's watch house, the bastion of its safety and vigilance, seemed to have succumbed to a similar sense of hibernation.

Falko Rummenach had allowed himself a feeling of informality, removing the blue woolen cloak from his shoulders as he found a chair by the side of his commander-in-chief's fireplace. He'd already declined the invitingly warm goblet of mulled wine the officer had poured him, and yet an atmosphere of friendly, off-duty hospitality remained prevalent in spite of the distinctly business like occasion.

Commander Berthold von Streibermacht, chief officer of Nuln's City Watch, had settled into a comfortably overstuffed armchair that matched the similarly comfy position of his status in life. Falko noticed the commander's habitually pale cheeks and friendly smile as the two men faced each other – the carefree visage of a man whose law enforcement problems remain comparatively small in an otherwise disorderly world.

'It's certainly true that the winter season has cursed us with a strangely inordinate number of suicides this year,' the commander smiled at Falko. 'And yet it

surprises me that the sensible and level-headed Rummenach should find himself in agreement with the rantings of some crazy old flagellant who seems to believe a painting must be responsible for the phenomenon.'

The watch commander's room had already grown dark in the encroaching twilight, a gloom of brown shadows having risen around the hearth as Falko found himself gazing thoughtfully into the orange embers of the fireplace.

'I'll admit the idea of a homicidal painting sounds completely absurd,' Falko said. 'And yet there would seem to be a certain similarity of temperament at work in the case of each suicide. For one thing, there is the similarity of time, the fact that this growing melancholy seems to take hold of its victims' minds so suddenly and always during the hours of darkness. Not to mention their fondness for the writing of lengthy and rather tedious suicide notes, all of which seem to communicate a sense of futility and desperation. Words like "hopeless" and "darkness" permeate the letters repeatedly, as though each person had been suffering a similar affliction of the soul. Indeed, the two letters that were left behind by the priest and the curator are virtually identical in their use of language.'

Falko's gaze had moved away from the fireplace, passing out through the window of the watch house to where the city's cobbled streets lay covered in a blanket of snow. For a long time it had seemed to him that the most noticeable thing about the dreary winter season was its silence. Not the simple absence of a city's great noise, but the cloying and suffocating quiet of a graveyard.

'There's no reason to suggest such details amount to anything more than mere coincidence,' the commander grunted. 'And you know as well as I do we can't go burning a priceless work of art just because some lunatic flagellant or melancholy collector has decided to put an end to himself! Indeed, you may be aware that this priest of yours has long been a renowned and tireless campaigner against works of so-called blasphemous

and obscene art in the city museums. Brother Alberich spends his time marching up and down the art houses and galleries complaining about the nude statues on display. Virtually every painter and sculptor in the city regards him as a pain in the arse. So I wouldn't bother taking any of this too seriously if I were you, Herr Rummenach.'

Falko began to fidget in his seat. He felt distinctly unsatisfied by his commander's dismissive response.

'The problem with Brother Alberich's recent outbursts is that they've become a little more extreme than usual,' he said. 'The old man seems hell-bent on causing as much trouble as possible. He's already threatened to inform the witch hunters in hope that they'll bring this Tilean painter to trial on charges of sorcery, all of which will undoubtedly cause a damaging scandal for the gallery.'

Commander von Streibermacht took a sip of wine from his goblet. He lowered it slowly and stared at Falko.

'Such a scandal would be embarrassing and possibly even disastrous for the nobility at court,' he said. 'Especially since the countess herself has personally commissioned a new Sombera painting for the gallery's collection. Indeed, it's due to the various recommendations passing her way concerning this young Tilean's reputation as a brave new talent that she's said to have considered gracing him with her patronage should the new work meet her approval.'

'Indeed,' Falko agreed, feeling slightly gratified by the sense of urgency he'd managed to impress upon his commander-in-chief. 'Such a scandal might prove disastrous unless we can nip it in the bud by pre-empting the trial with a simple investigation of our own. I already have a mind to visit this Tilean boy-genius as quickly as possible before the witch hunters can be allowed to get their torturing claws on him. We'll see what he has to say for himself first.'

In the red glow of the light from the fireplace, Falko was able to read the troubled expression of his commander-in-chief as he considered the prospect of a

courtly scandal. The man's face had grown as shadowy as the room itself now that the darkness of night had fallen across the skyline of the city.

'Do what you must,' he told Falko. 'Just so long as you can stop this idiotic priest from causing further trouble.'



AS FALKO followed the rows of paintings and statues along the gallery's corridors, he thought that the romance of melancholy seemed to be something of a fashion among the inhabitants of Nuln. It seemed as though the city's pampered denizens had managed to acquire a decadent taste for the tragic and sorrowful, drawn to sadness and morbidity simply because they'd never experienced the day-to-day horrors of a life spent struggling for survival out in the border territories of the Empire.

Such decadence had been unknown amongst the commonality of Stirland backwoodsmen and country folk who'd raised him to work and survive on the fens and farmland of his birth. It would even have met with sneering disdain amid the ranks of the state armies where he'd spent his youth, and yet Falko had come to enjoy the wealth of artistic riches that lined the walls of the city's imperial gallery. He'd begun to recognise their beauty, the elegant glamour of statues and figurines that adorned the chambers and corridors of the stately, dome-shaped building. So he'd decided to make it part of his daily routine, paying a visit to the museum and stopping by to inspect the condition and safety of the Sombera painting, checking that a member of the city watch had already been placed on guard as a means of protecting it from further attack.

The ground floor chamber was filled with sculptures that dated from a time in the Empire's history when it had been fashionable to create statues of an exceptional power. One was of a naked man walking, one hand clutching his face in despair. Another was of a forlorn-looking nymph creature staring up toward the stars, her hands chained behind her back. Falko's favourite, though, was of a satyr bearing off a woman. He had no idea which historical or mythical characters were depicted, and yet the statues' power was scarcely diminished by his ignorance. The theme in these sculptures was always the same: desire and suffering. ◊

The paintings on the surrounding walls were mainly portraits: the usual assortment of pristine and pale-skinned noble women, their porcelain beauty putting Falko more in mind of a bunch of dying flowers than of the robust and rosie-cheeked beauties who'd always appealed to his own taste. He'd come to recognise the style and idiosyncracies of one or two of these artists during his daily visits: the cherubic-looking females who adorned the hundred year-old portraiture of the Tilean masters; the peacock blues and cardinal reds which were the trademark of da Milleius, the currently fashionable Estalian 'genius.'

And yet it was the array of landscape paintings on the rear wall of the chamber that seemed to hold a certain pre-eminence, an unstated yet obvious pride of place in the hierarchy of the room.

The Sombera painting had been hung next to a sconce on the wall, catching most of the candle light and managing to remain prominent in the eye of the beholder thanks to the presence of the city watchman who stood before it, cudgel hung at his side, supposedly on the lookout for religious fanatics.

'I'll admit I'm no art critic, Renfred,' Falko told the watchman. 'Still, I've never been too keen on this modern stuff.'

Falko had entered the chamber to find Renfred, the young soldier on duty, gazing up at the spot where Sombera's picture had been bolted securely into a

wooden frame. The frame itself seemed to provide little in the way of protection, and really only made the picture more prominent amid the grand arrangement of the other paintings.

'It's certainly drab-looking,' Renfred admitted. 'And yet there's something about it that's fascinating. As though there were more to the painting than meets the eye.'

The young watchman was staring up at the canvas in an attitude of rapt fascination, seeming to ignore Falko as the older man craned his neck and began to study the piece.

Midnight Sun was said to be Sombera's vivid depiction of a solar eclipse – an eclipse caused by the moon of Morrslieb. The painting had been hailed as a masterpiece of innovation by critics and artists the length and breadth of the Empire thanks to its ingenious use of colour in depicting the strange coronal light of the Red Moon and yellow sun as they crossed each other's paths. And yet Falko had always regarded the painting as a strikingly dark and basic piece – almost child-like in its lack of detail.

It was almost entirely made up of shadow. The black silhouette of the obstructing moon seemed to symbolise empty space, a hole in the sky which became monolithic and vacuous the longer you observed it. True, Falko was able to recognise the brilliance of Sombera's technique, the small and subtle use of colour and light which had been used to depict the weird halo of colliding aureola, the orb of the Chaos Moon thwarting the sun. And yet, if anywhere, the painting's true genius lay in its infinite-looking zone of shadow. A monstrous void in the heart of things.

Indeed, it was only now, as Falko leaned forward to scrutinise the canvas in detail for a second time that he'd begun to notice the minute detail that seemed to be present, lying deep within the dark brushwork and black-upon-black painted patterns.

The surface of the piece was of a shining darkness, possessing a glossy sheen beneath which spread a swirling murk of

shades that appeared to be in motion, an effect quite possibly the result of the flickering candlelight reflected in pearly patches on the face of the canvas. And yet, it seemed that as he gazed at the picture, Falko was able to hear a faint roaring sound in which there could be detected something both beastlike and subterranean. His fancy seemed to notice a resemblance in the outline of these imagined shapes, perhaps grossly distorted versions of claw-like extensions reaching out from a central, shapeless and shadowy mass.

Truthfully, Falko admitted to himself that he'd been looking for signs of devilry in the picture, any clue that might point to witchcraft on Sombera's part. And yet, if you were being logical about it, it seemed there was nothing concrete to suggest heresy of any kind. He supposed that because Brother Alberich had spoken so much about daemonic influence and possession, it was only natural that he, Falko, should see such forms, in some deranged fashion, as being incorporated into the work.

'My imagination seems to get the better of me whenever I look at this damned thing,' he told Renfred. 'Although it's pretty lousy for all that.'



THE SNOW flew into a haze of shapes and sounds as the darkness fell around the streets and alleyways of the slum quarter. Wind-banked snow collected in high mounds beside the walls and doorways of houses, another inch or so having covered the cobbles and gutters. Strong gusts of wind blew Falko's woolen cloak around his face as he approached the doorway, a squalid-looking domicile that, for reasons best known to Sombera himself, the young Tilean painter was said to have chosen as his garret.

Falko had knocked several times, bending into the wind, his thick fur and his woolen cloak billowing out behind him like a sail. He cast a shadow upon the doorway, the full face of the Mannslieb moon hanging in the night sky behind him; a shadow that suddenly disappeared as the old wooden door was yanked open.

'Whoever you are, you'd better have a damned good reason for disturbing me while I'm in the middle of my work!' the young man in the doorway yelled above the scream of the wind. The black curls of his hair had been blown away from his forehead, the white silk shirt trailing behind him as he glared at Falko's military attire. Sombera's face was sickly peevish, the gaunt, hag-face of an invalid beggar. There were discoloured pouches under the man's eyes, possibly caused by lack of sleep.

'I'm here on behalf of the city watch,' Falko said. 'I'd appreciate it greatly if you'd hurry up and allow me inside before this foul weather turns me into an iceberg.'

The wind billowed a sand-fine sheet of white powder behind them as Falko stepped forward, following the young Tilean's signal to enter the building. Dim candlelight spilled from a single, crooked overhead sconce and Falko's gaze passed over the contents of the barren little room, which was empty of furniture apart from a single straight-backed chair that stood marooned in the centre of the stark and wooden floor. A clump of tattered rags and blankets lay curled at the foot of one wall beside a pile of books. A solitary painting easel and its canvas – a work-in-progress, occupied the far corner of the studio.

'So this is where the great Sombera chooses to paint his masterpieces, eh? Well, I don't mind telling you I've had to search the whole of this Sigmar-forsaken slum quarter before I could even find your freezing little hovel.' Falko brushed the snow from his beard, removing his helmet in an informal gesture that was intended to put his respondent at ease. 'And so now, perhaps, you'll be able to tell me why a popular artist such as yourself should

decide to take up residence in a worm-eaten old shanty when he could just as easily have been living in more luxurious quarters.'

'Indeed, I might.' The young man turned his face towards Falko, giving the soldier an unpleasant smile. 'But since your visit is obviously unofficial, and since you've not come down here to arrest me, I may just as easily tell you to bugger off! You see I'm already aware of the pathetic vendetta that's been placed against me by that religious fool, just as I'm aware that my work has curried favour among the nobility in this forsaken city. It's thanks to their patronage that I've been able to come here in the first place. And I'm sure that the Baron Friedrich van Eiberhartz – to name but one – would not take kindly to the news that I'd been intimidated by cretinous flagellants!'

In the dim light, Falko noticed the Tilean's complexion had become the colour of clay, and spots of waxy yellow stood out on the man's face here and there like the signs of a growing illness. His eyes looked hollow and dreadfully raw, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a sickly and contemptuous sneer. Meanwhile, Sombera's hands hovered below his chin, half-fisted, covering the skin of his upper throat in a protective, shivering gesture.

'You should rest and get some sleep once in a while,' Falko told the painter. 'I must say it looks to me as though you're coming down with a fever of some kind.'

He'd already begun to ignore the Tilean's outburst as he trod casually around the room, examining the assortment of painted canvases which lay discarded and partly concealed in the shadow of Sombera's current work-in-progress. It was a collection of morbid and nocturnal graveyard scenes, the dark and benighted style having already become familiar to Falko's trained eye.

'Make no mistake about it: I would have already arrested you had I found anything blasphemous in your work,' he informed the Tilean. 'But I'm here to warn you. And you may find it of some interest to learn



that the priesthood have already considered accusing you of heresy and witchcraft. Indeed, the burden of responsibility may be placed upon you to prove your own innocence in due course, although I doubt quaint little tomes such as this will be of much help in your defence.'

Falko had retrieved a copy of an old and especially fusty-looking volume from the book pile which lay partially covered by the mess of blankets in the corner of the room. A copy of Gottlieb the Stern's *Treatis Necris*, which, though not illegal, might well have been enough to raise eyebrows among the populace at large should the priesthood decide to use it as evidence against the young painter.

'How typical of these vulgarian clerics that they should limit their artistic sensibilities to some narrow idea of blasphemy!' Sombera sneered. 'It's no wonder I choose to live and work down here amid the very dregs of humanity where I can more immediately perceive the great truth of our civilization. The horror, the futility of what it means to be human. I'm a visionary after all! I paint what I see! And it's only right that such cow-minded imbeciles should fear my visions!'

The Tilean began to emit a harsh, dry ratcheting sound that shook his whole body. He seemed to have huddled inside his shirt, covering himself as the coughing fit tore loose from his chest. It was a feverish, almost papery wheezing noise, and yet Falko couldn't help the feeling that Sombera's sudden display of spluttering had been deliberately exaggerated in order to keep him at a distance.

'You're obviously becoming prey to the cold in this place,' he warned Sombera. 'Maybe you should take a little friendly advice and find yourself a warmer hovel to live in. Or at least find the time to sleep once in a while.'

The painter lifted his head and looked over at Falko as if he were an annoying insect. The overhead light on the wall behind him caught his gaunt but aristocratic cheekbones, not to mention the pallid skin, which seemed tautly stretched across his face.

'There can be no rest for a true artist.' He shivered. 'Especially an artist with my resources, my special and unique method of seeing the world. Don't you realize that?'

Falko came to a halt in his circuit study of the room and paused to examine the artist's easel and canvas, inspecting the palette and the range of painting substances and materials. The artist's knife, charcoal pencil and a residue of black powder lay around the various paints and colours. The canvas contained a pencil outline – the sketch of what seemed like a collection of angles and lines, blurry and insubstantial in the dim candlelight.

'Perhaps you've succeeded a little too well in your hopes of revealing the horror of the world,' Falko said grimly. 'But it will pay you well to remember that such morbid interests might land you in hot water, regardless of all those high society friends of yours.'



HE HAD come to regard himself as something of a trained expert over the previous week, gradually becoming adept at recognising the different techniques and hallmarks of the various painters whose artworks lined the walls of the city gallery. Yet Falko still believed that artists, and art curators especially, were at heart no more than a bunch of pompous, yellow-livered babies who might all benefit from a long stretch of military service. Call it an anti-social impulse, but the milksop expression of the gallery's deputy curator's face and his skinny arms gesticulating and waving angrily away inside that baggy silk shirt of his made Falko want to reach a hand out and grab the supercilious young fool by his scrawny neck.

'This is an outrage! An unmitigated disgrace!' Gertholt was saying. 'Not to mention highly unprofessional

considering the scandal that will ensue now that one of your bumpkin watchmen has suddenly seen fit to cut his own throat right here in the middle of the museum!’

Falko had already been called at the crack of dawn prior to his usual morning visit, arriving at the gallery’s ground floor entrance only to find another suicide had taken place, and this time within his own ranks.

A gaudy splash of red, so much brighter than any of the scarlets and crimsons that colored the museum’s rows of paintings, had splattered into a streak, daubing itself along the floor of the chamber.

‘Just look at the mess!’ The curator pointed to the sprawled, face-down body that lay in front of the Sombera canvas.

‘Mind your tongue.’ Falko knelt beside the body, snarling up at the curator as he did so. ‘One more disrespectful word and I promise you I’ll break your spine over my knee.’

He turned the corpse over gently, inspecting it dispassionately as Renfred’s staring, dead face flopped up to regard him. The boy’s visage was covered with blood, his expression a grimace of pain and despair. Although his throat had been cut from ear to ear, the young soldier’s eyes lay wide open, almost seeming to sparkle with the success of a practical joke he’d somehow performed.

‘But I don’t understand!’ the curator whispered cautiously. ‘Why in Sigmar’s name would the boy want to break into our gallery during the night simply for the sake of putting an end to himself?’

Falko didn’t answer immediately because he had already been fumbling with an object, a scrap of lettered parchment, which had been snagged between the stained, still grasping fingers of the corpse.

‘Maybe this will provide us with an answer,’ he said, retrieving the letter and unfolding it so that he might be able to read the young man’s final communication, his one last message to the world.

A familiar sense of dread settled over his heart as Falko read the words in the suicide note. Words such as ‘hopeless’ and

constant references to the darkness mirrored the exact wording of the letters left by the priest and the curator, not to mention the other recent suicides.

*The horror, the futility of what it means to be human!* Sombera had told him. *I paint what I see!*

Falko stared emptily at the note in his hand for several seconds.

‘It seems your Midnight Sun has claimed yet another of its admirers,’ he said grimly, rising from his haunches as he stared at the painting with a cool and cynical eye. The dark and monstrous silhouette of the shadow moon in the picture gaped emptily from its frame on the wall. A perfect image of nebulous despair.

‘Surely you can’t be serious?’ the deputy curator sneered. ‘Surely you can’t mean that you share the belief of that ridiculous lunatic priest?’

There were only the two of them present there in the dead silence of the chamber as Falko’s eyes traced the walls, moving back and forth, hunting out the other Sombera paintings that he knew were to be found on display. There were a full dozen Somberas in all, immediately recognisable, thanks to the Tilean’s growing obsession with darkness: his depictions of corpse-strewn battlefields, of ghoulish graveyard scenes and the frozen Northern wastes. Having studied the various paintings, it was only now, in a flash of sudden insight as he leaned forward to inspect one of Sombera’s more recent death-benighted landscapes, that Falko understood the significance of their chronology. He felt the hairs rise in gooseflesh along his skin, and as if from far away, from down a long dark corridor in his brain, he heard Sombera’s feverish whisper: An artist with my resources... my special and unique method of seeing the world!

‘These pictures grow more and more potent with shadow as the painter improves his skill,’ he told the curator. ‘It’s as though this man’s talent and his taste for darkness has somehow grown hand-in-hand with each other.’

Sigmund Gertholt stared with mild detestation at the coarse-looking soldier.

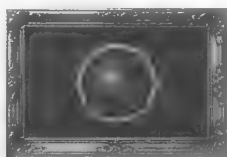
'But that doesn't prove a thing,' he said curtly. 'And you've said yourself that there is no sign of blasphemy or heresy in the picture's design.'

Falko cocked his head, staring around at each of the Sombera paintings on the walls and looking like a man who has just awoken from a deep dream. He was remembering the artist's palette, something about the materials he'd been using, that strange black powder...

My special and unique method of seeing the world...

His eyes moved back and forth, back and forth, over the darkness of each canvas.

'It may be true there is no sign of blasphemy,' he said quietly. 'But if I'm right about what's happened to young Renfred here, you should probably be counting yourself lucky the snow has managed to drive away what's left of your clientele.'



LONG SHADOWS played upon the crumbling garret walls, cast by a glow where a lone candle shone. Light flickered, looming in the silence of the darkened room. The only sound was a deep, sunken sort of respiration, the sound of air whistling in and out of nasal cavities that had narrowed and were beginning to mutate. A snigger or hiss might occasionally follow, and yet the rest was only darkness and silence. Vicci Sombera's attic garret was a room with no windows, a place where daylight was of no concern. The painter's silhouetted shoulders were slumped, hunched over the half-drawn canvas where he scratched and scrawled in a crude parody of human intelligence and artistry, his head now weaving oddly

from side to side as he sketched the outline of a blasphemy.

The flame of the candle burned with a wary, nervous light, which crawled and snaked along the bare wooden floor as Falko surreptitiously observed the scene. His inner calm, the quiet stealth of his entrance into the room, had been almost shattered by the distinctly inhuman sound of Sombera's breathing. A rank, foetid smell had somehow made itself at home in the air of the chamber, and the slumped shoulders of the young man in the chair indicated Sombera's lack of concern at the guardsman's presence. It was as though he hadn't yet noticed Falko entering or standing there in the doorway of the studio.

'I suppose it's too late for me to warn you that there are hazards in snorting that damned black powder you've grown so fond of, Herr Sombera.' Falko's hand wandered down to the sword at his side as he addressed himself to the young artist's turned back. 'Indeed, by now I would guess the powder has probably managed to destroy what's left of your mind in exactly the same way that it's beginning to pervert and twist your body.'

Falko stepped into the room, his throat dry as he walked, thanks to the effort of keeping his voice down to a calm and regular sounding pitch. The significance of the black powder, the familiarity of its residue and texture, had already occurred to him, playing itself out in his mind like the trace of an ugly rumour. Indeed, the possibility that warpstone might somehow be to blame, the increasing availability of the snuff powder which had been responsible for creating so many ravaged and horribly mutated freak-addicts in city streets the length and breadth of the Empire – all of this had been nagging at the soldier's thoughts since his first visit to Sombera's garret.

He heard Sombera's words again in his mind: *My special and unique method of seeing the world.* And yet, despite all expectations, he'd found himself barely able to repress a shudder of nerves as he

carefully stalked the edge of the room, gradually approaching the dark slumped shape while it sat watching him from the corner chair where its easel stood.

'This damned black powder, as you call it, has provided me with a stimulus, a wonderful enhancement of my artistic vision.' The young man's face had already leaned forward from the shadows, smiling, and Falko was able to recognise the harsh deformity that had taken place in Sombera's features. It was a distinctly reptilian mouth that grinned out at him from the darkened corner, though the Tilean's eyes remained human. 'I could even give you a demonstration of my new talents here and now if you wish. That's if you don't mind posing for a quick portrait.'

If anything, Sombera's voice had begun to resemble the low squeal of an excitable pig. A grunt of greed so monstrous you could hear the hunger in its breath. Sombera's knobby hands had splayed against the artist's easel in a spider's shape – the beginnings of claws – as Falko regarded the first freakish signs of deformity with an unhappy curiosity. Sombera's hair had already begun to disappear in places, replaced by a sleek, amphibious head and various markings that striped the moist, membranous scalp. His skull had actually begun to glisten ever so slightly as it moved under the bare light of the candle.

'My addiction to the powder was merely a matter of having the courage to immerse myself in forbidden visions!' Sombera continued grunting in his inhuman and yet horribly intelligent voice. 'The commitment of an artist must be total! And the wonder of my work is that it appeals only to those of a sensitive artistic nature. One might argue they're a little morbidly inclined from the outset, of course, which explains why certain dullards have been less susceptible to my genius and have managed to survive the experience.' The painter's yellowed eyes had narrowed slyly, suddenly showing Falko his snaggle teeth in a repulsively wide grin. 'You see, the powder has led me to understand the glorious futility of

all things – the vast inevitability of the Dark Gods! My goal shall be to unveil the hopelessness that lies in the hearts of men, to show them the pointlessness of their lives.'

The young man had begun to shuffle and squirm, giggling in his low, squealing voice and rocking back and forth in his artist's chair. Sombera's clawed hands scrabbled on the easel as he began cramming more black powder into the bare cavities of his nostrils. Crumbs of the snuff tumbled down the slick jut of his chin. His part-scaly, part-membranous scalp showed in patches under the flickering light, and it seemed to Falko that the painter had somehow managed to alter himself even in the short time they'd been together in the room with each other.

'Of course, I hope you won't mind posing for a quick portrait.' Sombera's yellow eyes were slanting slyly down at Falko's sword-hand, a hiss of laughter escaping through his grinning, tusk-like teeth as he suddenly poised, grabbing a knife from the side of the easel and getting ready to launch himself at the watchman before Falko could be allowed to escape the lair of the chamber.

'Well, I'm afraid there may be a little problem with that,' Falko said. He'd raised his arm in a signal gesture, answering the painter in a voice that was surprisingly calm and optimistic given the deadly tenor of his present situation. 'You see, I no longer have confidence in your talents now that you've driven yourself insane with that filthy powder. Added to which, I suspect my comrades in the militia may have a little something they'd like to say on the matter.'

The door crashed open against the wall with a violent bang, spilling thin white moonlight along the floor of the chamber. Dark figures tumbled into the room, their gaunt forms seeming almost unreal in the darkness, the moonlight reflecting brightly on the bolts in their raised and loaded crossbows.

Sombera's head snapped around; his gleaming yellow eyes considering the half-dozen or so militiamen who'd

invaded his sanctum. The Tilean's sleek head was cocked at the deadly questing angle of their weapons, his jaw champing in surprise and frustration as their shafts whickered through the air and pierced his flesh. Sombera's scream – an almost child-like shriek of surprise, pain and fear – made Falko wince as he raised his sword in the air ready to strike. The young painter was cowering backward, his face a scrawl of hatred as he crouched in the shadows at the back of the room.

Another cluster of arrows showered his body, sending Sombera scurrying to the floor amid lithe shrieks and caterwauls of pain. He rolled over on his back, eyes staring wildly up at Falko from the blood-smear mask of his face.

'Damn you then!' His cries had become a giggle of pain as he reached out a hand from the shadows, yellow eyes flickering from one soldier to the next with a kind of lunatic clarity as he whispered to them all. 'It seems the world is destined only to remember me by the legacy of my glorious paintings.'

Falko stepped forward, placing his foot on the Tilean's helpless body and burying his sword almost hilt-deep, finding the place where the man's corrupt heart had already been slowing to a halt.

'I wouldn't count on that if I were you,' he said abruptly.

He turned his back on Sombera's corpse and stepped forward to inspect the half-completed canvas that stood in the corner of the room – a partially painted series of charcoal-penciled drawings that seemed impossible to decipher amid the darkness of the poorly lit chamber.

'I suppose this must be the very same masterpiece he'd been working on as a commission for the countess,' Falko said. He lifted the unfinished picture away from the painting easel and brought it down on to the floor with an unceremonious crash, stamping and tearing a hole in the surface of its canvas, using his boot again and again until it had been destroyed beyond all recognition.

'Sigmar alone knows what mayhem it would have caused,' Falko muttered to himself, 'had our young friend here managed to finish the accursed thing.'



OUTSIDE, IN THE bitterly cold night air, the snow lay white and crisp and even along the banks of the River Reik, a stark shroud that covered the city as far as the eye could see.

Yet it might even have been a time for celebration, for a sense of triumph, had Brother Alberich not been one of the righteous brethren who'd chosen to dedicate his life to the hallowed pursuits of the flagellant path. He had been granted his wish after all, had been acknowledged in his cause, his unswervable belief having been rewarded by the turn of events, just as he'd known it would be.

He had taken it upon himself to destroy the Sombera painting, had been given permission by the city's civic council to burn all the known works of that foul agent of darkness in a single glorious and purifying bonfire.

And yet, having done so, Brother Alberich stood gazing from the top of the great lone bridge that straddled the River Reik. His feet poised at the extreme edge and he stared down as the first snow of the evening began to fall, becoming increasingly prolific until he could finally see what was inside the falling flakes of snow, just as he was now finally able to see what was present within the essence of all things.

What he saw was a black snow tumbling with futility from a black sky. The roaring blackness above and the roaring blackness below. Brother Alberich stared as if hypnotized into the black depths of the water.

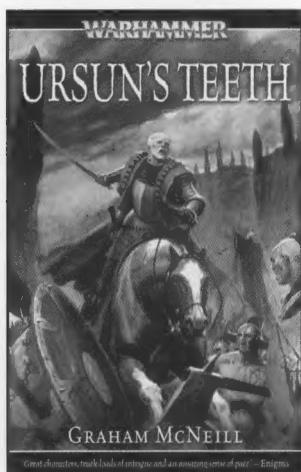
He stared into the inky dark surface of the water and finally understood. \*





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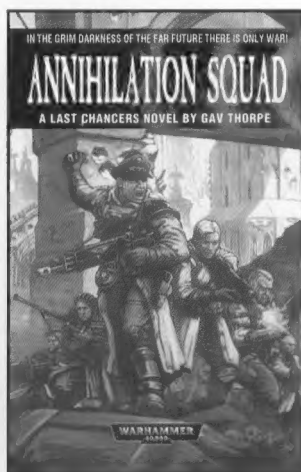
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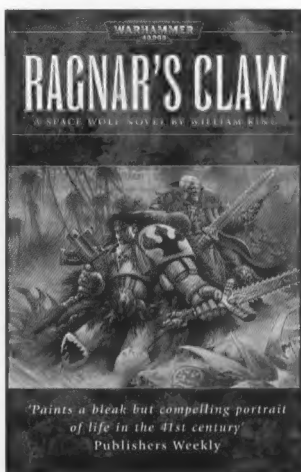
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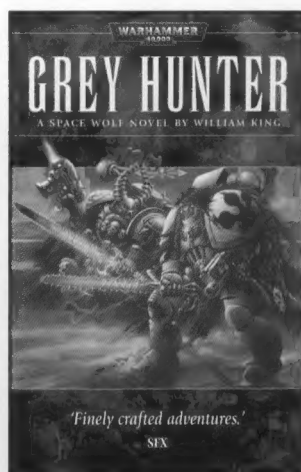
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- **ECHOES OF THE TOMB by Sandy Mitchell**

They hit it like a tsunami, swarming over the precious equipment and ripping it to pieces with their metallic mandibles. Guards and techpriests alike scattered in panic, but many were too slow, being pulled down and engulfed by that hideous carpet of scuttling death. Within seconds a few muffled screams, quickly silenced, were the only traces of their presence left.

- **THE VAMPIRE HUNTERS by Robert Earl**

His torch flared defiantly as it swept it through the air. For a moment it's guttering light chased the shadows all the way back to the fall of rocks, the barrier over which Grigori had lost the two vampire hunters. He was beginning to suspect that he'd lost them for good.

*The scuttling grew louder, scratching the inside of Grigori's skull.*

- **TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT by Richard Williams & Jim Brady**  
**THE SHEPHERD'S TALE**

'One old ewe was particularly difficult and did not survive his attentions.'

- **CALCULUS LOGI by Darius Hinks**

The creature holding him in one of its monstrous claws raises him higher, seeming to savour the moment, then it rams the man's ruined torso greedily into one of its many gaping mouths and crashes heavily back down onto the sand. The impact sends out such a huge seismic tremor that fifteen and-a-half pieces of the cave's roof fall down around me.

*The behemoth has returned.*

- **VESPERTINE by David Griffiths**

Looking over the edge, he felt giddy for a prolonged, slow and final moment. Snowflakes and tears blurred his vision, a bell tolled in the distance as he stepped off into space; he felt himself plummet and cried out.

'Sigmar, forgive me.'

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